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Old '49; Or, THE AMAZON OF ARIZONA.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," ETC., ETC.



"HOLD HARD, STRANGER—I'VE GOT THE DROP ON YE!"

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BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING,"
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WILLIAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ENTOMBED ALIVE.

"Hold hard, stranger—I've got the drop on ye!"

Clear and sharp the words rung out, rising above the echoes born of that last swift scramble of the little dun mule in reaching the top of a steep rocky ascent, rendered doubly difficult by the moisture that spread from the little mountain spring just ahead.

Strong, significant words wherever heard; how much more so when emphasized and backed as on this occasion!

Among the rocks that almost overhung the narrow trail on the right hand, was perched the author of that stern command—doubtless a human being, but so thoroughly disguised that the mother who bore him might well have passed him by as a stranger.

A mass of black, relieved only by the glitter of nickel trimmings on the leveled revolver, surrounded by the clinging vines through which the masked man had thrust head and shoulders—this was all that the startled traveler could distinguish at his first swift glance. But then he saw more. A hood of black cloth with apertures cut for eyes and mouth, snug and close-fitting; shoulders and breast—all of the form that was not hidden by the vines and the rock upon which his elbows rested—were masked by the same material. He could see that the revolver covered his brain—could even distinguish the bright blue eyes that gleamed through the somber mask—but this was not the first time that he had stood even closer to grim death, and with a swift movement of his head, the rider glanced around him, summing up the chances for and against an escape from the trap he had run headlong into.

"No use kicking, mate," added the mask, with a low, careless laugh. "That burro can't outrun a bullet, and even if you were to dodge my lead, the boys would everlastingly salivate you. Uncover, lads, and let the pilgrim take a squint at ye—so!"

Four black-hooded and black-coated forms appeared in the narrow pass only a few yards ahead of the man on the mule. Turning his head, he saw four more cowed forms standing at the foot of the short hill. The first mask guarded the right wall, while even a cat could not have scaled the opposite barrier anywhere between the rear and front guard.

The leader waved his hand, and his black-robed fellows vanished without a sound.

"Now you see 'em, now you don't see 'em—but they're there, all the same, ready for business if you choose to play the fool," lightly said the chief, still holding his cocked revolver at a level.

"You're a new hand at this sort o' business, ain't ye?" and as he spoke the traveler rested his left leg across the neck of his mule, elbow on knee and hand supporting his chin as he stared coolly, almost impudently up at the mask. "No offense intended, but seems to me you're taking a monstrous lot o' trouble on a mighty poor prospect. A blind man could see that this lead won't pan out enough to 'chuck' a sick kitten!"

"Maybe we're just rehearsing against bigger game—just getting used to the ropes," laughed the mask, seemingly amused by the sang froid displayed by the "held-up" man. "For all that, we're artists, every one, and even in play we do our work right up to the handle. I have only to say the word, and you are a dead man. Say it I will, if you give us any trouble or try to cut up rusty."

The traveler uttered a short, hard laugh.

"The only thing about me that is worth more than this old blind burro is my life. Be sure I'll not run the risk of losing that by any foolishness. Sing out your orders, and I'll follow them if any man can."

"Up with your hands, then, and bear in mind that I'll bore your brain at the first crooked move. Close in, lads, and go through the gentleman."

The traveler raised his hands and sat once more astride the seemingly sleeping mule. The black-garbed men advanced and closed around him, removing the pistol-belt from about his waist, searching every pocket and thoroughly exploring every inch of his clothing, inside and out, not once, but a second time, urged on by their leader, whose voice now rung out hard and impatient.

A graver shade settled over the face of the prisoner as he noted this, for he began to believe that there was something more than a common lust for gold actuating these men. His

keen gray eyes filled with a more intense light as the leader of the road-agents came down from his perch among the vine-clad rocks and conducted the search in person. For an instant he was strongly tempted to snatch away that hideous black cowl and lay bare the man's face to solve the thrilling doubt that assailed him. But he was still cool-brained enough to know that death would follow such a move, whether his suspicion was proved right or wrong, and he restrained the mad impulse.

"I told ye you wouldn't make your everlasting fortunes out o' my rags," he said, as the outlaw leader gave over his vain search. "Took me for the express company or a silver train, didn't ye? Hate like thunder to put you to so much trouble, all for nothing, but I'd 'a' been better fixed if you'd only sent me word afore-hand."

"Shut your trap, or I'll shut it for you!" growled the chief, evidently sadly out of sorts.

"You're boss just now, so shut it is. Maybe that's a polite hint for me to pick up my legs and travel. 'Twould be just as well, I reckon. It's a good bit from here to Purgatory."

"Count yourself lucky if you don't have to travel beyond Purgatory," uttered the chief, grimly, his words being greeted by a general chuckle from his men, that served to emphasize his witticism. "We're not done with you yet. Straddle that burro. Be lively! I've lost too much time already."

The traveler was no fool, and knew that no good could result from delay in obeying this order. Unarmed, he could do nothing against these nine men, and without a word he bestrode the still sleeping mule.

At a motion from the leader two of the masked men tied their captive into the deep-seated saddle, then bound his ankles together beneath the mule's belly. A noosed thong drew his elbows behind his back, and then the light of day was shut out by a black hood similar to those worn by his captors, only drawn over his head hind side before.

The touch of a knife-point woke up the sleepy mule, and the blinded prisoner felt himself being led along the narrow mountain-trail to an unknown fate. Only for a few moments was their progress uninterrupted, then came a halt, and through the muffling hood the captive could distinguish the sound of horses being brought forth from the covert where they had been left until the carefully prepared ambush should be sprung. A low-muttered sentence from the chief, then two of the masked men grasped the little mule by either end and forced it rapidly round and round. Their object was plain enough, and thoroughly successful. The prisoner could no more tell to which point of the compass they were turning than he could fly. There was no breeze to aid him, and, giving over the vain attempt, he waited for the end.

Not an audible word was uttered by any of the party. The chief led the way in silence with the air of one who had a certain destination in view, and his fellows followed his lead more like well-trained soldiers than a gang of lawless road-agents.

For an hour or more this ride lasted, the party winding through the rocky, rugged hills where only an occasional bit of shrubbery enlivened and relieved the gloomy grandeur of the scene. Then the leader drew rein and alighted in a miniature valley, the natural beauty and charms of which were doubled by contrast with the bleak, barren peaks surrounding it on all sides.

For a moment the prisoner was left to himself. He listened intently, but could hear nothing save the soft murmur of water flowing over a pebbly bed hard by. Yet he knew that his captors were close by, and with outward composure he awaited their pleasure.

"Unload that donkey. We might as well settle the business here as to ride any further," called out the chief, and the thongs holding the traveler in the saddle were instantly severed.

The chief stepped to his side and plucked the black hood from his head.

"Oblige me by alighting. I have a few questions to ask before we say good-by."

The prisoner obeyed in silence, taking in his surroundings with one sweeping glance. The outlaw laughed shortly as he noted this, and there was keen mockery in his tones:

"A man should rest peaceably here until the last trump calls him to breakfast. How do you like your graveyard?"

"I'd like it better under any other name," was the cool response. "You have brought me here to butcher me, then?"

"That depends in part on yourself. I don't suppose you are over-anxious to kick the bucket?"

"Not enough so to cut my own throat."

"There's more likelihood of our coming to terms, then. First, who and what are you?"

"A white man and your prisoner."

"Wonderful! But let me remind you once more that this is no farce. You see those men? You understand what they are working at?"

As he uttered these words, the chief pointed to where four of the black-cowled figures were kneeling near the base of an enormous boulder which stood on end just across the little

stream of water. With their knives they were loosening the yellow clay and throwing it out with their hands. Already the outlines had taken the form of a grave!

"Mighty poor prospect for striking pay-dirt there," was the cool comment of the prisoner. "New at the business?"

"Not exactly," with a short laugh. "That's not the first shaft of the kind they have sunk. Whether they give it up as a blind lead, or station you there as a guard against the claim being jumped, depends entirely on yourself. Now to business. What is your name?"

"Peter Stroud."

"Where from?"

"New York, if you mean where my residence is."

"Your business in these parts?"

"Searching for a missing client."

"His name?"

"Ethelbert Graindorge," and the gray eyes looked keenly into the blue eyes that gleamed through the round holes in the sable hood.

Were they laughing at him? What was the meaning of that curious light that sparkled in their depths? Oh! if that gloomy covering was only snatched away! If he could only catch one glimpse of that hidden face!

The masked man laughed mockingly as he read the face of his prisoner.

"Don't force me to blow your brains out before your time. Whether I am the man you suspect or not, does not matter just at present. Step over this way with me. Our conversation does not concern these good fellows."

As Peter Stroud followed the lead of the masked man, he regained his former coolness, and when they once more stood face to face, he wore a mask to the full as impenetrable as that of the black hood.

"You are a detective, I believe, Mr. Stroud?"

"Not exactly; I am a lawyer."

"In quest of a fugitive from justice, though?"

"Wrong again," was the quiet response.

"Ethelbert Graindorge may have committed crime—a score, for aught I know to the contrary—but even so, he has no cause to fear or hide from me. Just the contrary."

"That means you are a friend of his?"

"If he will allow me to be such—yes."

"Speak plainer—talk out," impatiently uttered the mask. "I know more of the matter than you think, perhaps. Why are you hunting so persistently for this Graindorge?"

"Why should I tell you my secrets?" and a sullen shade settled over the strongly marked features.

"Simply because I make the demand and you dare not refuse. You see what those fellows are doing? That will be your grave unless you talk straight to the mark."

A brief silence. Then the shadow lightened.

"I'm not anxious to fill the situation. After all, I don't see how you can injure my interests in the matter. What is it you want to know?"

"Why you are searching for this Ethelbert Graindorge?"

"To place him in possession of a fortune to which he has fallen heir," was the prompt reply.

But the masked man broke into a hard, unpleasant laugh.

"You are sure that fortune is not the hangman's noose?"

"Because of the David Arbuckle affair? Bah! for one-half of the fortune Ethelbert Graindorge is entitled to, I would be willing to assume all his risks on that score. The money would ransom his neck a dozen times over!"

"The legacy is a large one, then?"

"A million and a half—rather more than less."

"A neat sum, surely! Who left it?"

"An eccentric uncle—for a still more eccentric reason; because Ethelbert Graindorge was the only one of the family—save himself, of course—who had displayed anything like genius—meaning in the Arbuckle case."

"Eccentric enough—if true. What was his name?"

"David Demond—"

The man in the mask cut him short with a sneering laugh.

"Bah! you have overshot the mark. Old Dave Demond was poor as a church mouse, and had scarcely wit enough to take him into the house when it rained."

"You are Ethelbert Graindorge, then!" exclaimed the other, his eyes glowing, his cheeks flushing hotly.

Beneath his mask, the outlaw bit his lip sharply, for the words had fallen from his tongue without reflection. But his confusion lasted only for a moment. The remedy for his imprudence was in his own hands. And in his eagerness to take advantage of the unintentional admission, Peter Stroud had committed a still more fatal mistake.

"What matter? The confession will be of no benefit to you," he said, with a sneer, adding: "I am Ethelbert Graindorge. What next?"

"I can place you in possession of this fortune—"

"I can take possession if I choose to run the risk of hanging for that Arbuckle affair."

"Not without my aid," was the positive re-

sponse. "True, David Demond willed his fortune to you, but the world believes he died insolvent."

"Bah! not two years ago I heard from him. He was then almost without a dollar, and doubtless he died—if he be dead—a pauper. This is all a cunning lie on your part to draw me into a snare. You are no lawyer, your name is not Peter Stroud. You are a detective working in the interests of the Arbuckle tribe. You think to reap the reward offered for my arrest. Instead, yonder lies your grave, and I mean to see you safely planted!"

"You bury a million and a half of good money in the same grave, then," was the quiet comment.

"You still persist in your ridiculous story, then?"

"Because it is the plain truth. David Demond died a rich man, as no one knows better than myself, for I was his lawyer and confidential adviser. Idiot or not, he was smart enough to go into Wall street and come out 'way ahead. I don't say he made it all fairly, or even honestly, but that fact will not make it any the less good money in your eyes, or in mine."

"Through it all the old man was the only one who had a good word for you when the Arbuckle affair came to light. The—the genius you then displayed excited his admiration, and when he died, his fortune was all willed to you. This will be placed in my hands, bidding me keep it secret until I could find you and deliver it into your possession. This I am ready to do—on conditions."

"May I ask what those conditions are?"

"Certainly. When you sign an agreement giving me the odd half million—which will leave you an even million—"

"You are generous," laughed the mask. "Why not reverse the sums? Your cheek is worth a cool million."

"Wait until I am through; then make your comments," quietly uttered Stroud. "Out of this sum, I agree to clear the path of all obstacles to your return. Until that is accomplished, you can remain *incog*."

"You can show this will in proof of your words?"

"At the proper time, yes. Of course I was not foolish enough to carry such a document about my person. The will is safely hidden in New York. Sign the contract, come with me, and you shall have the evidence of your own eyes."

"No one else knows where this will is hidden, or aught of its contents?" demanded the mask.

"No living soul. Unless I return to bring it to light, the secret will remain forever hidden."

The masked man laughed long and loudly.

"My dear fellow, you have relieved my mind wonderfully. May that will lie hidden until the mystery of your death is revealed to the world in general—I ask no more."

"What am I to infer from this?" demanded Stroud.

"That I am not Ethelbert Graindorge, but Henry Demond, sole offspring of David Demond, and consequently the heir to his fortune."

"He was unmarried—he had no son."

"So you say, but I beg to differ with you. After all, even should that will turn up, it will not matter much, since Ethelbert Graindorge died three years ago—one year after that Arbuckle fiasco—single and without legal heir."

A mocking laugh followed, but Peter Stroud said nothing. He saw that the bold game he had played was lost, and that he must pay the forfeit. But not a change came over his hard-set features as the mask covered him with a cocked revolver and marched him to where the men had hollowed his grave out at the foot of the big rock.

"Not very deep, but it will hold you securely enough when your tombstone is put in place," laughed the mask, making a signal to his men.

Peter Stroud was seized and a rope wound around him, then he was placed on his back in the shallow pit.

"Better close your eyes, or the dust may fall into them and give you annoyance," sneered the chief as he drew a little to one side. "Put his weapons in with him, boys. Somebody may see and recognize them, else, and I don't want the matter raked up against us."

He was obeyed in silence. Then the black-robed men grasped the two stout levers they had fashioned from young trees, and passing around behind the rock, proceeded to topple the delicately poised mass over.

The doomed man, as he lay, could see the huge rock begin to tremble, and though his body lay nearly a foot below the surface, he knew that the enormous weight would crush him to a shapeless mass.

One minute of unutterable horror—then the great rock toppled over with a loud crash! A cold, devilish laugh came from the black-hooded mask, for he felt that the secret held by this man was forever hidden!

CHAPTER II.

COWBOYS AND TENDERFOOT.

PURGATORY!

"A 'red-hot' town that was in every way worthy its name, was Purgatory in the land of

precious metals—not the city which still bears the peculiar name, in Colorado, but a rattling mining camp of the Arizonian foothills, just in the height of its youthful glory at the date treated of. It bears another and more respectable name now—has settled down into a quiet, humdrum town enough, with but little of its original "git-up-and-git," about it—which fact you may hear lamented almost any day whenever a couple of "old residents" meet over a social glass or game of "draw."

On the afternoon in question, things were booming in Purgatory. A little band of "cowboys" had somehow strayed thus far from the ranges, and were now celebrating the winning of a goodly sum from one of the city "tigers."

They were only four in number, counting each man singly, but taken together they were an army.

"Tain't none o' my funeral, boys," said a snug-built, shaggy-bearded, gray-haired man in rough clothes, as they paused before "Mack's Place," the most respectable saloon in town. "I don't b'long here myself, but I reckon thar'll some o' the chiefs show up by knockin'-off time. The town's got that reputation, an' it's likely you'll see all the fun you want afore bed-time."

The cowboys insisted on the veteran's entering and joining them in a drink, but as soon as the liquor was swallowed, he slipped away and resumed his position on an empty keg outside, his eyes roving here and there as though in quest of something as yet invisible.

At that hour of the day the streets were well-nigh deserted. The human bees were at work, the drones had not yet awakened. There was a small crowd hanging around the "flush" cowboys—for the most part bummers and worthless deadbeats who would cheer and laugh at a kick that landed on their own carcass if they fancied there was a taste of liquor to be gained thereby.

Suddenly the gaze of the veteran became fixed. A human shape was slowly strolling down the center of the unpaved street—that of a man, but dressed in a style not often seen in a rough mining-camp. From the crown of his silk hat to the thin soles of his patent leather boots, all was in perfect keeping, not with his rude surroundings, but himself. In one word he seemed a Broadway dandy of the better type, picked up and planted here without a crease in his irreproachable costume.

A strange sight enough, but hardly sufficient, one would think, to cause the old miner to turn so pale and tremble in every limb like one suddenly smitten with an ague. Yet such was the case, and more—one hand grasped a pistol-butt and half drew the weapon from its scabbard, when—

Crack! a pistol exploded sharply.

Other eyes than those of the veteran outside the door of "Mack's Place" had observed the neatly dressed gentleman.

"For the love o' Moses, boys, jest looky yonder!" cried one of the cowboys, stretching out a hand. "Somebody's circus bu'sted loose, an' thar's one o' the monkeys dressed up in store clothes!"

That was enough. His fellows left their liquor untasted on the bar and flocked to the wide doorway. The veteran outside did not hear them, and he had eyes only for the dandified-looking fellow who was now nearly opposite the saloon, placidly smoking a cigar, and all unconscious of the sensation his appearance was creating.

"Two to one I kin bu'st that plug hat, fust shot, an' never tetch a ha'r o' the critter's head!" laughed Dick Knowdell, one of the half-drunken cowboys.

"I see it, an' go one better," chimed in Jack Irish. "Even up, 'at I kin snuff his see-gar from here—"

"Drinks fer the crowd ye don't do it!"

The last words were blended with the sharp explosion of the swiftly-leveled revolver. Whether by chance or really marvelous skill, the lead sped true to its mark, and the lighted end of the cigar sent out a little cloud of sparks and ashes into the face of the stranger.

Back went his head with a sudden jerk that almost dislocated his neck. The shining tile fell to the ground as its owner brushed the fire from his face and eyes. Instinctively he stooped to recover his hat, when another explosion came, and he fairly felt the wind of the ragged bullet as it cut a hole through the tile.

Quick as thought the dandy straightened up and faced in the direction from whence came the sound of burning powder. He had heard the first shot, but had not connected it with what happened to his cigar. But this last could be no accident, and there was a hot flush upon his face as he saw the crowd standing in the door of Mack's Place.

A little cloud of smoke hung above their heads. Their pistols were half-leveled, but the voice of Dick Knowdell was pleasant enough as he called out:

"Pick up yer hat, stranger, an' come have a drink."

For one instant the man addressed hesitated. He saw the ready pistols, and knew that his life was wholly at the mercy of the reckless gang.

He could neither resist nor flee, and stooped to raise his perforated hat, then slowly approached the saloon, not a trace of color in his face.

Even more agitated seemed the veteran digger, whose pistol was now out and cocked. He arose, and, striding forward, met the stranger a few yards from the saloon.

"Don't ye go in thar—they're crazy-drun' an' 'll kill ye!" he muttered, warningly, his eyes glaring strangely. "Jump to one side an' blaze away at 'em—I'll help ye—"

"None o' yer durned tricks on travelers, thar!" cried out Dick Knowdell, warningly. "Somebody 'll git hurt ef ye don't mind."

"You hear?" hastily uttered the young man. "Don't run your head into trouble on my account. I'm going in—not ready to die, just yet."

Brushing past the old man, he reached the narrow platform before Mack's Place. The cowboys and the bummers made way for him to enter, but he paused on the threshold, glancing swiftly from one face to another.

His head was bare, for he had not put on his hat since picking it up from the dust. Now, with a silk handkerchief he began removing the dirt-stains from the tile.

A trifle above the medium height, square-shouldered and long-limbed, his trim shape admirably defined by his neatly-fitting suit. His head was well shaped, his features clean-cut and regular. Dark blue eyes, brown curly hair, imperial and mustache of the same hue, both carefully waxed to a point. His complexion of clear red and white was fair and smooth as that of a woman. Taken all in all, a more handsome man would be hard to find, judged by civilized rules, but the cowboys regarded him with poorly-disguised contempt.

"Heap o' style ye're slingin' on, stranger," sniffed Dick Knowdell. "But that don't matter so much long's ye kin punish the bug-joke. We axed ye in fer a drink—what'll ye take?"

"It was your invitation, then, that I heard," and the pointed mustache curled slightly, though the voice was soft and smooth as new silk.

"That was mine," and the cowboy grinned as he pointed to the perforated hat. "T'other was Jack, here. He's the boss boy fer fine tetches. Two to one any other o' us'd 'a' barked your face-handle 'stead o' snuffin' the see-gar."

"Yes, but—of course I don't want to give offense, or kick up any row, but, ah—don't it seem to you that amusement of this kind is a little dangerous—to the other party?"

"You're new to these parts—a tenderfoot, ain't ye?"

"Well—I'm not positive I understand your meaning," hesitated the dandy, glancing down at his patent leathers. "I am blessed with a corn or two—rather tender, sometimes."

His blue eyes opened widely at the loud laugh which followed this admission, but before he could ask an explanation, Dick Knowdell added:

"You'll soon git used to it, mate. That's a sorter playful way we have o' savin' our lungs when we want to hail a pard. Come, take a drink an' call it squar'."

His head was turned aside when he winked meaningly at his fellows. Plainly all was not yet clear sailing for the innocent tenderfoot, and none of the rest moved toward the bar where Dick and his victim now stood alone.

"Two whiskies straight, barkeep"—that's the only drink fit fer a man, pard, an' ef anybody at my invite nominates anything else, I takes it as a bloody insult. Don't tetch it so light, man—thar!" and he filled the tenderfoot's glass even full. "A gallon o' that wouldn't start a ha'r on a bald-headed baby! Drink hearty!"

The tenderfoot tried to obey, but before half the dose was swallowed, he turned red in the face, strangled, then sat down the unemptied glass, tears in his eyes as he glanced apologetically into the grinning face of the cowboy.

"Really I couldn't help it! The liquor is so terribly strong—and I am not used to drinkin'—"

"Ef I thought ye meant it as a slight—never mind; I ain't one to pick a quarrel. You'll come to your milk afore you've bin in this wooden country a month."

"I hope so—and now, I really must tear myself away. Some other time I hope to meet you gentlemen again—"

"Wait a bit, pard," said Jack Irish, stepping forward. "I cain't let ye go like that. 'Twas me that knocked your see-gar west-end-an'-crooked a bit ago. Take a drink with me to show that ye don't lay up no grudge ag'inst my durn foolishness. Set 'em out, barkeep!"

"Really, my dear sir, I can't drink any more—I feel quite ill, already—that whisky—goes against my stomach!" stammered the tenderfoot, hastily retreating from the bar as the cowboy thumped his huge fist upon it.

"Stranger," and the words came from deep down in that brawny chest, "when I ax a pard to drink, it means *drink whisky or smell powder*. You're dead sure you can't drink?"

With ludicrous haste the bummers scrambled to one side, feeling sure that they were about to see some deadly sport, and not caring to risk their precious lives by stopping the lead de-

signed for another. See fun they did, but it was not precisely of the sort they anticipated.

The situation was this. The half-score dead-beats in a clump to the left; Irish leaning his back and both elbows on the bar; his three comrades standing close by; the old man who had warned the tenderfoot against entering the saloon, near the door, while the dandy stood half-way between him and the bar.

The instant Jack Irish put his query, a startling change came over the tenderfoot. Just where they came from, no man save himself could have told, but now each hand grasped a cocked revolver, one muzzle staring the astounded cowboy full in the face, while the other covered his no less amazed comrades.

"I can't drink, but I can shoot!"

Clear and incisive came the words. No hesitation or stammering now, but stern and deadly earnestness. The blue eyes blazed wickedly. The white teeth showed themselves beneath the waxed mustache. The weak-kneed dandy had vanished, and in his stead was one every inch a man!

"And shoot I will, at the first move any of you make without my permission. Up with your hands—I'll blow the man through who hesitates a moment!"

It was a bitter pill for the cowboys to swallow, but they were pistol-born and pistol-bred, and they knew that the stern threat was not an idle one. Before they could draw a weapon, this man could put in four shots, and at such short range, the chances of a miss were too slight to calculate on. As though moved by one spring, up went the four pair of hands above their heads.

The stranger laughed softly—a laugh that reminded them of the purring sound emitted by the fierce mountain lion when crouched to leap upon its prey.

"A little more practice, and you will be perfect. Now—"

"Say, pard," interrupted Knowdell, with a sheepish sort of laugh, "let up on us, an' we'll call it squar'."

"Not just yet. You thought you had run across a poor, soft, half-witted tenderfoot—"

"Which is whar we got left, bad?"

"Silence!" sternly cried the stranger, shifting his aim so that the silver drop covered Dick. "Speak when you are spoken to. It is my turn now, and I mean to play the game out to the end. You went out of your way to insult and abuse one whom you never dreamed had the sand to resent an insult from such fire-eaters as you pretend to be. I don't care so much for the shooting, since I have sometimes played tricks of the same sort; but then you tried to rub it in too deep. I had no desire to quarrel with you, for I am a peaceable man. I obeyed your orders. I even drank with you, though whisky is like poison to me. I would have gone away, and let the matter drop forever; but you were not content to let well enough alone. You were bent on having an 'Arizona fandango'—and I resolved to gratify you."

"My dear fellow," he added, nodding to Jack Irish and emphasizing his words with his revolver, "dance!"

"Durned ef I do!" the big cowboy growled, grating his teeth.

"Are you sure you won't dance? I don't like to be disagreeable, but it's either dance or eat powder. Dance!"

"Don't be a durned fool, Jack!" called out Knowdell. "It's all in a lifetime, an' only what we 'lowed to make him do ef he refused to take his lick. Dance, man! we've all done it some time or ruther."

Whether this argument moved him, or the fear of death, must remain an open question, but the big cowboy, still holding his hands above his head, moved a little away from the bar and began a rude shuffle, looking so supremely ridiculous that even his own mates joined in the general laugh.

"Watch the critter close!" called out the old miner, warningly. "He means mischief. Keep him kivered—I'll see that you hev fa'r play."

"Who in thunder 're you?" growled Dick Knowdell.

"Old '49, they call me," was the cool response, and the gray eyes gleamed over two leveled revolvers. "Chuck full o' fun I be, too! Was born in a cyclone, an' fed on harrycanes ever since—you hear me howl!"

"Thanks!" said the stranger, never removing his keen gaze from the dancing cowboy. "If any one attempts to chip in, plug him and charge to my account. I'll take the quarrel off your hands as soon as I have put this clumsy brute through his paces. Now then, beauty, you know the next step. Down on your knees and 'eat sand!'"

Swiftly Jack Irish dropped to his knees, at the same time lowering his right hand to a pistol butt, but the stranger had him covered instantly, crying sharply:

"None of that, you treacherous cur! Release that weapon, or I'll scatter your brains over the floor! So—eat sand."

Growling out a fierce curse, Irish bent his head over and lapped the floor with his tongue. The "Arizona fandango" was ended.

Loud yells of laughter greeted the perform-

ance, from none more heartily than the three mates of the humbled cowboy. The "tenderfoot" smiled slightly as he noticed this fact, but made no comment for the moment.

"You can get up, my dear sir," he said, addressing Jack Irish, who was still looking for a chance to turn tables on the man who had so thoroughly discomfited him. "Now, let me give you a little good advice; don't play any more tricks on travelers until you are sure what they're made of, or you may get left, bad!"

"You bet your sweet life I'll git even, sometime," the enraged cowboy growled.

"Indeed! You're a bigger idiot than I took you for, else you'd keep a close tongue until fairly out of the woods. As it is, I may as well go the entire porker. I don't know your other name, Mister-man-that-ventilates-other-people's-hats, but you'll greatly oblige me by taking a position alongside our friend the dancer, by the bar. Come, walk up to the rack and take your fodder," he added, sharply, as Dick Knowdell hesitated.

"Can't we call it squar', boss—or, sense I've tuck one drink with you a'ready, let one o' these boys take my place. Sandy McGill here was born dry, an' Dave Parmiter was never knowed to 'fuse a snifter—"

"They're out of the game this deal," quietly interposed the tenderfoot. "I don't doubt they were ready to call the turn if you two had failed, but I've got nothing to do with what might have been. Come, don't make me repeat my invitation."

With a sheepish laugh the cowboy advanced to the bar.

"Now, barkeeper, do yourself proud. These gentlemen are dry. Shake them up an *Arizona cocktail* each."

A wild yell of anticipatory mirth went up from the delighted spectators. The bartender hesitated, with a side glance at the rage-inflamed countenance of Jack Irish.

"If you insist, of course—"

"I do insist," sharply. "Fill my order at once."

"Do it an' I'll plug ye the fust chaine I git, durn ye!" growled Jack Irish.

"This gent's got the drop on me now, and you haven't, laughed the bartender. "Guess I'll take the longest chances, and I reckon you'll find me at home whenever you call on business."

To the uninitiated it may be stated here that at the time treated of, the "Arizona fandango" or "clog dance" and "Arizona cocktail" were very popular institutions among the rougher element, who were ever on the lookout to catch tenderfoot or other stranger to the custom. A refusal to drink, or if a person went to the bar alone, without a general invitation for those present to join him, was the signal for pistols to be drawn and the penalty to be enforced. As for the peculiar beverage, each bar-tender had his own fashion of mixing it, the sole end in view being to make it as disgusting and nauseating as possible.

Fortunately for our friends the cowboys, Mack's Place was an unusually "high-toned" saloon for a mining town, and hence they were furnished with a less bitter dose than otherwise might have been concocted; but now the best was bad enough. Two dirty pint cups were brought forth, into which were placed a small quantity of each liquor the bar afforded, an inch of lard-oil, the same amount of kerosene, a few thin shavings of soap, a liberal dose of biters and pepper-sauce, the whole being coated over with cayenne pepper and stirred up with the bartender's finger.

"Drink heartily, gentlemen!" cried the tenderfoot, showing his white teeth. "No heel-taps—leave so much as a drop in the bottom of your cups, and Purgatory will see a first-class funeral before sundown! Just imagine I am drinking the cocktail, and it'll taste ever so much sweeter. Down with it—I'm not jesting!"

With a revolver covering each—with those blue eyes, now blazing like living coals, and the clear, musical voice ringing out in deadly earnest—the two cowboys dared not refuse; but there was a vast difference in their manner of taking the nauseating dose.

Jack Irish gulped his down with a single effort, then dashed the cup full at the head of the grinning bartender—who swiftly dodged and thus saved his countenance at the expense of the neat pyramid of glasses behind him.

Dick Knowdell took one sip, then a sickly grin overspread his homely face, while tears stood in his eyes.

"I was raised on the bottle, an' I never yit see a drink made that I couldn't throw myself outside of. I've sampled 'most every sort, an' 'sider myself a fa'r jedge o' mixed drinks, but—I cain't re-comend this 'un—'thout tellin' a durned lie—an' I'd give my old boots fer jist one whack at the durned cuss as fust made a *Arizona cocktail*!"

A general laugh greeted this speech, but if the cowboy thought to soften the tenderfoot, he was disappointed. Steady as fate the silver-plated pistol covered his brain, and still sterner came the sharp command:

"Drink first, talk afterwards. Come, I'm in a hurry!"

"I kin do it," and with one enormous gulp the cocktail disappeared. "Yas—I kin do it—but I ain't hankerin' a'ter another job o' the same sort!"

"It's easy enough when you once get used to it. You'll soon come to your milk if you stay in this wooden country!" quoted the tenderfoot, smiling.

"Now, gentlemen, we are square," he added. "In parting, suffer me to give you a little good advice. The next time you tackle a stranger, see that he don't get the drop on you, and above all, don't pick up Easy Elbert for a tenderfoot again. Ta-ta. I'll see you later!"

Turning on his heel, Easy Elbert strode toward the door.

"Look out! he's pullin' onto ye!" cried the old miner who had given his name as Old '49.

But Easy Elbert was not near so careless as he seemed. His keen ear caught the sound of a revolver being cocked, and leaping swiftly aside, turning around as he did so, the bullet sped by Jack Irish barely grazing his shoulder. Up rose his own pistol, and exploded twice in swift succession, each bullet going straight to the mark.

CHAPTER III.

A PERSISTENT WOOER.

HUGH HARDAWAY, known to a good many in and around Purgatory as "Hard Hugh," uttered a growl that was almost a curse as he shifted his position slightly to relieve the hip on which he had been resting for the better part of an hour. His heavy brows contracted until they formed an arch above his black eyes, and these useful members wore anything but an angelic expression as they peered through the storm-splintered top of the stunted pine growing directly before him, though on a slightly lower level.

"Devil fly away with the little jade!" he muttered, gnawing savagely at one end of his thick, bushy mustache. "Does she mean to keep me waiting and watching here all the afternoon? Unless she shows up pretty soon— Well, I should think it was about time!"

Through the top of the dilapidated pine-tree across the narrow valley, and half-way up the opposite hill, stood a small log-cabin, half hidden beneath hardy wild grape-vines. For nearly two hours Hugh Hardaway had been lying in ambush, watching the open door of this little building, expecting and hoping for just what now rewarded his persistent, if not patient vigil—the vision of a slight-built, girlish figure attired in shoulder-shawl and sun-hat, as if for a pleasure stroll through the hills.

His heavy brows relaxed, and his expression altered to one almost soft, but only for a moment. Then a black and bitter curse grated through his clinched teeth, and his face was distorted by a scowl hideous as sin.

"Ten thousand curses rest on and crush that impudent rascal!" he growled, as a tall, active form came rapidly forward from the little cluster of buildings to the left of the cabin and joined the girl. "Three times only has she stepped outside the door since I've been on watch, and every time that infernal Pettigrew has run to join her. I wish he was my overseer—look at the sap-head—squeezing her fingers as though he was milking a cow!"

In good sooth, the entertainment provided by the unsuspecting couple for the jealous eyes watching them so closely, was hardly warranted to fill Hugh Hardaway's cup of joy to overflowing, and had the intervening distance been short enough to render success sure, or even probable, Periander Pettigrew's ardent love-making would certainly have been forever ended by a pistol-shot.

Who and what were these three persons? As they will each figure more or less prominently in these pages, a more favorable opportunity for introducing them to the reader in due form will hardly present itself.

Mabel Wilder, second daughter and youngest living child of George Wilder, sole owner of the richly paying mine, the Silver Brick, was still hovering on the dividing-line between girl and womanhood. At times she seemed but a little child—so fair, so frail, shy and modest—only to surprise those who knew her best, the next breath, by a subtle change that bespoke her claims to womanhood. Easy-going George Wilder—a little dull, not to say stupid, outside of his business life—was the last to note this growth in his youngest and favorite child. The first—or nearly so—to realize that Mabel was "a woman, fit to be wooed, fit to be won," was Periander Pettigrew, the young overseer of the Silver Brick mine.

Pettigrew was young in years to hold a position of such importance, particularly under an owner who trusted nearly everything to his honesty and fidelity, but as yet he had proved equal to the task, and George Wilder had no cause for complaint.

The young overseer was fairly good-looking, despite the almost ungainly length of his limbs and their slenderness. Time would remedy that in a degree, however, and Mabel—not to betray

her secret—thought Periander was—well, nearly perfect in every respect.

Hugh Hardaway is not so easily placed on paper after a satisfactory manner. It is easy enough to say that he was of the middle height, but unusually broad-shouldered and heavily built; that his complexion was nearly as dark as that of an Indian, his hair and luxuriant full beard black as a coal, his features fairly regular and what a casual observer might even term handsome, his tongue fluent and very suave whenever the end in view was deemed worthy the exertion; that he dressed well and richly, though after a somewhat "loud" pattern; that he seemed to have plenty of money and credit; all this may be said, and yet something be lacking to complete the description. That missing item was a vague something that struck one at the first interview, almost invariably growing stronger with the passage of time, until one fairly disliked the fellow, without really knowing why.

Hugh Hardaway was the first suitor pretty Mabel Wilder had, and one of the greatest surprises easy-going George ever encountered was when the rich speculator proposed to marry his "baby" out of hand.

"Why man, she ain't—she's only—" he stammered, in open-eyed amazement, only to be cut short by Hugh.

"She's sixteen past, so she tells me. My mother was married still younger. Say yes, and I'll guarantee neither you nor she'll ever regret the match."

Blunt and straightforward was his motto—so Hugh Hardaway was fond of declaring—and this portion of his wooing at least deserved that designation. But easy-going George Wilder loved little Mabel too well to act hastily in such an important matter, and Hugh Hardaway was forced to grant the time he asked for consideration. Then it was that Wilder began to learn why so many called the speculator Hard Hugh in speaking behind his back. A hard man he was, not above sharp tricks—some hinted at decided rascality and even crimes, and there was evidence enough to convince Wilder that Hugh Hardaway was not a fitting mate for his dainty darling.

It would have been better for all concerned, perhaps, had the miner cast aside his easy-going habits for once and given the dark-faced suitor a positive denial, but instead, he first sounded Mabel on the subject, finding that she disliked Hard Hugh as thoroughly as it was possible for her gentle nature to hate anybody.

At ease on this score, Wilder referred the impatient lover to the maiden, declaring that he would never run counter to her inclination, then chuckled to himself with lazy delight at having avoided a stormy discussion.

It was hardly fair on Mabel, though, and if ever poor girl was persecuted, she was that unfortunate during the next few weeks. Almost every day the unwelcome suitor visited the house, pressing his cause whenever he could catch her alone, until she was driven into flatly refusing him. Even then Hard Hugh did not give over his purpose, though his visits, or rather interviews were less frequent.

So great was Mabel's dislike that she had taken to watch the road leading to the cabin from Purgatory, and whenever she espied Hardaway coming, she would steal away into the lonely hills, to linger there until he should be wearied of waiting for her return.

On the three past days Hugh Hardaway had visited the Wilder cabin with this same result, and he was not so thoroughly love-blinded but that he shrewdly suspected the real facts of the case. On this day, the fourth, he followed a different course. At the expense of a good deal of hard climbing, he secured a position on the hill opposite, from whence he could watch the little cabin and the movements of its inmates. If Mabel should leave the house for the purpose of taking a walk, he meant to follow and cut off her retreat, then talk plainly, even if he had to use force to make her hear him out. On the other hand, if the sun set without her affording him this opportunity, he would approach the cabin under cover of the darkness, and make his appeal, of course modified to suit the circumstances.

It was a weary watch, but Hard Hugh made one discovery that opened his eyes to a fact that he had not so much as suspected ere this. Mabel had another lover—and one from whom she did not run, too. If Periander Pettigrew was not a favored suitor, then Hard Hugh's eyes played him false.

"That accounts for it, then," he muttered, an angry, wicked glow in his Indian-like eyes as he watched the young couple, now slowly moving away from the cabin. "His pipe-stem legs have filled her mind so she can't think of a man. Look out, gawky! Some day I'll take you across my knee and break your back—"

A hissing, devilish curse filled the hiatus. The young couple had passed beyond the view of any one who may have been in the house, though still plainly visible to the jealous watcher in ambush on the other hill. Then—the tall head of the young overseer was bowed, the broad sun-hat was tilted back, not alto-

gether by his hand, and the two faces came together after a fashion familiar to all lovers.

Only for a moment—then Mabel turned and fled in sweet confusion, while Periander retraced his steps to the mine.

Doubtless they both were happier for that kiss, but the jealous watcher? He felt a pang that could not have been sharper had some strong hand driven a knife to the very center of his heart. Bad though he might be, he loved Mabel Wilder passionately—quite as much for her own self as for the baser end to which winning her was only the first step. Well for happy Periander that the distance was too great to be covered by a pistol ball, else he would have fallen dead ere that kiss could dry upon his lips.

"Her first—you afterwards!" muttered Hardaway, shaking his clinched fist after the tall overseer, then arising and gliding rapidly among the thick-lying rocks, more determined than ever to secure a private interview with Mabel.

The task proved an easier one than he had dared anticipate, though involving no little labor in the way of climbing and descending. But Mabel was so buried in her own thoughts, that she cast few glances around her, and even those were too dreamy to discover the dark figure that dodged here and there along the hillside, taking advantage of every cover, surely cutting her off from retreat to the cabin.

This advantage secured, Hard Hugh took his time, well content to let the maiden wander still further away from home, from whence alone she could expect assistance in case of need. For the time being, it would be hard to say whether the trailer most loved or hated the girl. This much is sure. He mentally vowed that Mabel should promise to become his wife, or never return to the cabin she had left.

For nearly an hour he trailed her, until far from the cabin. Let her shriek never so loudly for help, no one there could hear the appeal.

It really seemed as though the poor girl was playing into his hand, for she at length paused in a spot from whence she could not escape him by flight. A mountain stream ran through the narrow valley, here trending east and west. The grass grown bank Mabel followed grew narrower until it ended abruptly against a tall, perpendicular rock. A small, level space, nearly oval, was formed by a depression in the face of the steep, rocky hill, carpeted with grass and moss, enlivened by a few sprays of purple mountain aster. At this point the little stream grew broader, expanding into a deep pool, through the clear waters of which dozens of little trout were darting. The opposite shore was fringed with high grass and small shrubbery, the margin of level ground being considerably wider.

Here, all unsuspecting of the evil eyes that were watching her so closely, Mabel came to a pause, plucking a spray of flowers, then sinking down upon the moss, picking the slender purple threads away one by one.

Hugh Hardaway watched her for a few moments from his covert, trying to master the evil passions running riot in his heart. He could see her profile, and, though such sentimental matters were never much in his line, he read that tender smile aright as the girl held the last leaf in her fingers for a moment, before gently pressing it to her red lips. She was testing love's oracle, and the answer was all that she could wish.

Hard Hugh could bear no more, and strode forward, his burly form blocking the narrow path as Mabel looked up in affright at the abrupt footfalls. Quickly she sprung to her feet, but Hardaway made no movement to leave the way of retreat open.

"Don't let my coming disturb you, Mabel," he said, his deep voice softened until it sounded almost musical. "I had no idea of finding you here. I came after a mess of trout," with a ready lie suggested by one of the nimble fishes leaping up after an unwary bug.

"I have stayed too long already—please let me pass," hurriedly uttered the maiden, unable to disguise her uneasiness.

Hard Hugh could not avoid seeing this, and, after all he had learned that day, it proved the last feather. He forgot the lie he had just uttered, and the words came hotly:

"You have not been here five minutes, and an hour would be short enough if that long-legged fool of a Pettigrew had found your retreat, instead of a man!"

"You have dared to follow me—a spy!" flashed forth the indignant beauty—far more lovely now than Hard Hugh had ever seen her in quiet. "Stand aside and let me pass!"

Hardaway grew cooler as she grew warm, and with a short laugh he maintained his position.

"Yes, I followed you—why not? This land is free to all, I believe. Besides," and his voice grew deeper, more earnest, "it was my only chance. Yesterday—the day before and the day before that, too—I called at the house to see you. You saw me coming and ran away—I did not suspect the truth at first, but I know it now. To make sure, I watched half the day from the hill opposite your house—Yes," he

added, with a hard, bitter laugh, as the maiden cast down her eyes and a painful flush crept over her cheeks, "I saw the little episode between you and that green booby, Pettigrew—"

"Then why did you follow me?" demanded Mabel, her face still burning, but not half so vividly as her sky-blue eyes, that now met his gaze unflinchingly. "If you saw what you say, was that not enough to convince you that your pursuit is not only useless, but disagreeable? I am not ashamed of it—I have the right to receive his—his kisses," the words being spoken boldly after a barely perceptible faltering, "for I am his promised wife."

The man bit his lips hard to keep back the angry words that sought utterance, so hard that a drop of red blood trickled part way down his long beard, then trembled there like a crimson dewdrop. His will was a powerful one, and quickly gained the victory.

"Even if I had not resolved to follow you before, that scene would have been quite sufficient to insure my doing so. Why? Well, if you knew me better—as you will before we say good-by on this occasion—that is the last question you would need to ask. Come. Sit down again. You will be tired out before the end, for I mean to have my say out this time."

"If you are a gentleman, Hugh Hardaway, stand aside and suffer me to pass!" she cried, desperately.

"When you have heard me through, not before," was the short, sullen response. "I've taken too much trouble to throw away my chance now. Sit down or remain standing, just as you please, but listen to me you must and shall."

"You shall repent this dastardly conduct—repent it most bitterly!"

"Possibly—which is only one reason the more for my making the most of my advantage while it lasts," he said, with a laugh, the lightness of which was flatly contradicted by the manner in which his heavy brows drew themselves together.

In sober truth, Hard Hugh was to the full as disagreeably surprised as Mabel herself. Until now he had never dreamed of her possessing such a spirit—she so gentle and timid, into whose blue eyes one sharp word would bring tears. He had counted on breaking her will by a display of resolution—perhaps with a few threats that would sorely frighten her, without compromising himself seriously or affording a clew to the really diabolical plans he had rudely shaped in his mind. The unanticipated spirit Mabel displayed not only surprised but enraged him, rendering him far less prudent than he had intended being.

Mabel looked into his eyes, and the fierce fire she saw there caused her heart to throb fast and suffocatingly. For the first time since Hard Hugh put in an appearance she felt a sensation like fear. Never before had she seen that ugly light in human eyes, but a subtle instinct told her that it boded danger.

Her first thought was that Hugh Hardaway had been drinking to excess, and with a sickening feeling of terror she shrunk back until the rock wall barred her further retreat.

Hugh Hardaway laughed again as he entered the little oval level, for he saw his advantage and meant to press it to the utmost.

"Come, my dear, there is no need in beating around the bush when plain, straightforward words are just as easily spoken. You know what my sentiments are toward you. I give you one more chance to consider your refusal. Pledge me your word of honor to marry me—"

"Never!" cried Mabel, with a flash of reviving spirit.

"Wait until I have finished before you commit yourself," snapped the ruffian, showing his teeth. "Accept my offer—swear by all you hold sacred that you will be my wife whenever I demand the redemption of the pledge—and as true as the sun shines up yonder, you shall never regret the deed. I am rich—I mean to be still richer. I love you as I believe no living man ever loved before. I can, and will, load you down with all the luxuries and elegancies of life. You shall never know sorrow or regret—"

"Stop! you are only wasting your breath—only giving yourself and me needless pain. What I told you then I can only repeat now. I do not love you—I cannot marry you. You are cruel—unmanly—to press the matter after what I told you but a few moments ago—that I am the promised wife of another."

"Take care, girl!" Hard Hugh's deep voice growled warningly. "I want to be your friend, but if you refuse me positively, I'll be the bitterest enemy woman ever had! I can love as but few men are capable of loving, just as my hatred is a thousand-fold more deadly than that felt by the average man."

"I may fear the last, but I scorn and despise the other!"

"Beware, girl!" snarled Hard Hugh, his heavy frame quivering convulsively, his white teeth gleaming like those of a hungry wolf. "The devil is active enough in me now without you stirring him up any more. Think where you are—alone with me here, wholly dependent on my mercy. Are you wise to taunt me with what I have lost—bah! The prize I

covet is *not* lost! More surely than ever it is in my grasp—see!” and striding forward his heavy hand closed upon her shoulder.

The red light in his eyes was fairly devilish—his passion-convulsed countenance was that of a madman.

A soul-sickening fear seized upon the maiden, and only for his supporting grasp, she must have fallen.

“Spare me—have mercy!” she gasped, faintly.

Hard Hugh laughed until his white teeth glistened through his black beard, but there was little mirth in the sound.

Before he could speak, a dark form uprose on the opposite bank of the stream, crossed the barrier with a deer-like leap and clutched Hugh Hardaway before he fairly realized his peril. One mighty effort—then Hard Hugh was hurled headlong into the water!

CHAPTER IV.

OLD '49 CHIPS IN.

His still smoking pistol dropped to the floor, and with a wild howl of mingled pain and fury, Jack Irish flung up his arms and staggered back against the bar. Both hands showed red, and blood pattered down upon the sand-sprinkled floor.

“Who comes next, gentlemen?” cried Easy Elbert, and his weapon turned to cover the mates of the wounded cowboy. “I paid that clumsy brute shot for shot, but I’ve plenty more left for the one that first puts in his claim—”

“Shoot him—kill the cuss!” snarled Irish.

“The shooting won’t be all on one side, and the next time I pull trigger, it will be *to kill!*” added Easy Elbert, and none who heard the words could doubt that he meant precisely what he threatened.

The three cowboys hesitated, their hands on their pistols, where they had dropped the instant Jack Irish made his desperate attempt to wipe out in blood the disgrace and ridicule with which he had been covered. They believed their sworn comrade had received his death wound. They were solemnly pledged to back up each other’s quarrels, and to avenge the death of those who should fall first. They were as wild, reckless and careless of life as the average cowboy, but there was a deadly coolness and nerve displayed by this dandified young fellow who called himself Easy Elbert, that held them in check against their will.

“Three ag’in’st one don’t sound well,” exclaimed Old '49, leaping forward to the side of the young sport, his revolvers cocked and covering Sandy McGill and Dave Parmiter. “You two critters buck ag’in’st this harrycane on two legs! Mind, I don’t say I kin do ye justice, but I *do* reckon I kin git one bite while you’re makin’ a squar’ meal!”

“Thanks for your good will, old man, but I reckon I am able to stand the racket,” laughed Easy Elbert, a trace of contempt in his voice as he eyed the cowboys.

If the truth was told, the cowboys were really pleased and not a little relieved by this action of the veteran, though less experienced eyes than theirs could tell that Old '49 meant business, that he would begin burning powder in deadly earnest the instant they made a hostile motion. But now the odds were against them, since four ready pistols covered them while their own weapons were undrawn, and not even Jack Irish could blame them for drawing back and waiting for a more favorable opening to avenge his injuries.

“The pot’s yourn, stranger—rake it down!” cried Dick Knowdell, raising his empty right hand. “Jack opened it without giving us a say-so, an’ ef you out-held him, ‘tain’t our fault. Mought ‘a’ bin different ef he hadn’t shet us out o’ the fust draw—”

A furious, snarling curse burst from the wounded man, and starting up from the bar against which he had been leaning, he shook his blood-dripping hands in the air.

“Takin’ water! goin’ back on your oath! Oh! ef I only had the use o’ even *one* o’ my hands—ef I could only grip a knife, I’d slice yer heart out an’ eat it afore your eyes, cuss ye!” he screamed, frothing at the mouth like a madman, shaking his crippled fingers at Easy Elbert until the blood fell around in a crimson spray.

Until that moment none save those two knew the exact effect taken by the shots the young man had fired so swiftly. Now all could see that both hands of the raving cowboy had been terribly torn and shattered, that almost beyond a doubt he was rendered a cripple for life.

“Count the cost next time, and maybe you’ll know enough to keep your fingers out of the fire,” sternly said Easy Elbert. “You opened the ball, thinkin’ to make me dance to your music. You thought me a timid, half-witted tenderfoot on whom you could impose without risk to yourself. I turned the tables on you, and if there had been one spark of manhood in your vile carcass, you would have accepted the result in good part, content to pay me back in honest coin when another opportunity offered. Instead, you try to kill me when my back was turned—a coward’s act, by which your life was

justly forfeited. Instead, I simply winged you, as the easiest method of keeping you from doing any more mischief—”

“Better ‘a’ bored my brains than this!” and growing weak from loss of blood the cowboy staggered back against the counter. “Oh, Lord! both hands gone! Better dead than left a cripple to starve.”

“Look to your mate, fellows!” cried Easy Elbert, sharply. One of you run to the Occidental for Doctor Paxton. Tell him I’ll settle the bill.”

Sandy McGill started for the door, and Old '49, with a dry laugh, followed close at his heels. The wisdom of this move was proved when the cowboy reached the threshold and whirled swiftly, whipping forth a revolver—only to find a pistol muzzle staring him full in the face.

“Better you didn’t, laddy-buck!” grinned the veteran. “I see’d the devil in your eyes afore you started, an’ knowed you ‘lowed to try a snap-shot ahind the young feller’s back. Right about face an’ *puckachee* hot-foot, or I’ll sink a lead-shaft plum through yer brain-pan! *Git!*”

During this brief episode Easy Elbert had never once glanced toward the door, though he was not so careless as this might seem to indicate. He saw Old '49 was on guard, and from what had already occurred, felt that he could place full dependence in him.

He tossed a gold coin upon the counter, saying:

“Pay for your liquor and the damage done by that cuss, barkeeper.” Then, to the two cowboys who were lowering their injured comrade to the floor, he added: “Let him have the best attention that money can command, and I’ll be responsible for the bills. If there should be anything else I can do for him, don’t hesitate to call on me. I’m stopping at the Occidental.”

Dick Knowdell glanced up, a sickly smile on his face, a peculiar light in his Indian-like eyes.

“I reckon you’ll hev a call from some on us afore the round-up’s over, stranger. We’ll know whar to find ye ef you’re in town, don’t be oneasy.”

There was a bitter threat underlying the words, as none knew better than the young man who gave his name as Easy Elbert, but he simply responded:

“There’s men a good deal harder to find, but none who give a warmer welcome to friend or foe, if I do say it. You’ll find me at home whenever you knock.”

Turning on his heel Easy Elbert left the saloon, followed by Old '49, in whose eyes struggled a strangely mixed expression. When a few rods away from Mack’s Place, he quickened his pace and touched Easy Elbert on the arm.

“Boss, let me shake, jist once! Thar! In all my ‘sperience—an’ I’ve hed more’n a little—I never see’d a cuter game played slicker then you come the turn on them bullwhackers back yender!”

Easy Elbert met the hard grasp cordially enough, laughing carelessly at the old man’s enthusiasm.

“I might not have come off so well, only for your timely assistance, my good sir. Yet I’d rather have run the extra risk than to have you marked down for coming to the aid of one you fancied was overmatched. Those cowboys are bad medicine. They’ll not forget the part you played. Be on your guard.”

“Ef ary one on ‘em think they kin git the drop onto the old man, they’re welkim to try,” chuckled the veteran. “I know I ain’t much to look at—‘bout the bigness of a pint o’ cider—but it’s *hard* cider an’ b’iled down at that! Boss, when I was a baby I sucked powder-soup through a pistol-bar’l. I cut my teeth on a gun-flint an’ played marbles with rifle-balls. I jist *did!*”

“No doubt you can hold your end level—your conduct back there amply proves that—but, if I may ask, why did you take the trouble to shoulder part of my quarrel? To the best of my knowledge I never saw you before to-day.”

“It’s a fool-habit I’ve got into, boss,” hastily replied the veteran, his eyes drooping before the keen gaze of the dandy sport. “Born into me, I reckon. Never kin see any fun goin’ on that I don’t want to stick a finger in, an’ I don’t ax fer much of an excuse afore I chips in. Got so used to fun out in ‘Forny that I can’t sleep sound unless I’ve hed a taste—”

A close observer would have felt assured that Old '49 was talking for a purpose. He was casting shy glances through his bushy eyebrows at Easy Elbert, even while seeming to be watching a bit of quartz which he was rolling over and over with the toe of his boot. As he spoke, there came a swift clattering of a horse’s hoofs down the street, and as Easy Elbert half-turned his face in that direction, the old man spoke out sharp and quickly:

“But that wasn’t my only reason, *Ethelbert Graindorge!*”

The rider, a woman, young and almost bewilderingly beautiful, swept past the two men at that instant. Her full black eyes met those of Easy Elbert squarely, but neither they nor her face gave any tokens of recognition, though the hot blood turned the fair skin of the dandy sport scarlet. Or was it caused by the words of Old '49? The veteran believed this was the

solution, and the strange fire grew more intense in his eyes. His left hand closed like a vise upon Easy Elbert’s shoulder, and turned him half-way round so that they once more stood face to face. And then he repeated the words:

“No, that wasn’t my only reason, *Ethelbert Graindorge!*”

The name was emphasized even plainer than before, but Easy Elbert did not seem to hear it, or if so, to heed, his gaze still fixed upon the rapidly receding shape of the fair horsewoman. His voice was thick and husky as he spoke:

“Do you know that lady? Who is she? What’s her name? Ethel—what did you say?”

A short, ugly laugh from the old man. He was not to be so easily blinded by this suddenly awakened interest in a strange woman. It was not her face but the name he so abruptly uttered that summoned the tell-tale blood to the cheek of this dandy sport. So sure was he of this that he was content to let the fish he had snared struggle yet a little longer, and in his old tone he made reply:

“Ain’t she a daisy, though! The two-legged critter as makes his claim good thar, ‘ll strike a bonanza, sure!”

“She is single—she has no husband?” eagerly.

“Never heered tell ef she hes, though it mought be thar’s one layin’ round loose. I hain’t bin here long enough to be sure. Sorter struck, ain’t ye?”

“You know her name? I failed to catch it just now. Ethel something, you said, I believe?”

Their eyes met fairly now, Easy Elbert’s frank and clear as ever, the old man’s glowing red and almost devilish in the intensity of their stare.

After a moment Easy Elbert frowned slightly and shook off the hand that still rested upon his shoulder.

“If you have any reason for refusing to answer a simple question, say so, and I’ll seek the information elsewhere,” he said, impatiently.

“They ain’t no reason that I knows of,” was the slow response. “I wasn’t thinkin’ o’ that. I was just lookin’ at your cheek—no,” he added, with another of his short, peculiar laughs, as Easy Elbert raised his handkerchief to his face, “you cain’t rub it off so easy—”

“Look here, my friend, you are talking and acting after an infernally queer manner. You’re an old man—you ran some risk in my behalf, though your aid was neither needed nor requested; still, I owe you my thanks for the good will so shown, and they are yours. But that don’t give you license to play the fool at my expense. Either tell me plainly what you are driving at, or let us part before one of us gets hurt.”

“All right. The lady fust, of course. Her name’s Kate Wilder—sometimes called Wild Kate, but no harm meant nuz yit slur intended. She’s plum squar’, so fur es I hev heered. She lives ‘long with her dad, who owns the Silver Brick mine, two mile or so from town. Thar you hev all I kin tell ye. Is it enough?”

“Thank you. What more I desire to know, I can learn elsewhere. I fancied I knew the lady, but the name is a strange one to me. I must have been mistaken.”

“*But I wasn’t,*” quickly uttered Old '49 with an emphasis that caused Easy Elbert to open his eyes wildly. “*Your name is Ethelbert Graindorge!*”

The dandy sport’s eyes opened still more widely than ever, and he stared at the old man in amazement—either genuine or else most admirably counterfeited.

“So—that is what you meant a while ago, is it?” he said, with a low, soft laugh. “I failed to catch the whole of the name, and thought you were referring to the lady.”

“You don’t deny it—you cain’t deny the name!” hoarsely uttered Old '49, his eyes aglow, his hand trembling as with a palsy.

“That I am Ethelbert Graindorge? But I most assuredly *do* deny it,” was the prompt reply. “My name is Elbert Gray—Easy Elbert for short.”

“You altered it—you cut both names shorter—the head off o’ one an’ the tail off o’ t’other—”

“My dear sir, either you are crazy or drunk and I know you are not the last,” coolly interposed the dandy sport. “My name is not, never was, never will be Ethelbert Graindorge. Is that plain and positive enough to convince you?”

Old '49 brushed one hand across his eyes as though something was blinding him. He stared into Easy Elbert’s face with such a curiously mingled expression of doubt, suspicion and obstinacy that the young man laughed outright.

The veteran chimed in, but it was but a sickly mirth.

“It cain’t be that I’m mistook—you’re tryin’ to throw sand in my old eyes. You stand thar the puffet pictur’ o’ your daddy when he was your age—I knowed him when you was a little cuss sca’cely able to run alone—”

“Wait a moment,” and one white finger touched the veteran’s arm. “Right here we’ll strike bed-rock, unless I am greatly mistaken. You are strongly agitated. I don’t ask why, because that is none of my business, since I am not the man you are looking for. Take time to re-

cover your composure, and we'll untangle this riddle."

The confident tone with which these words were uttered, more than the speech itself, calmed the excited man. Only the red light burned in his eyes. Otherwise he was once more the cool, quick-witted man he had showed himself before that enigmatical name was pronounced.

Easy Elbert saw this, and nodded approvingly.

"Good enough! You say you used to know my father? Or rather the father of Ethelbert Graindorge?"

"The same thing, or my eyes lie for the first time," doggedly declared Old '49. "I can't guess why ye should deny."

"I am denying nothing. I only ask your proof that I am this Ethelbert Graindorge. First, what was the given name of my father?"

"Cuthbert," was the prompt response, and Old '49's eyes grew still brighter as he fancied—was it all fancy?—that he could detect a faint shade pass over Easy Elbert's face.

"Correct—so far; my father's name was Cuthbert. You say that you knew him well?"

"Like a brother. We was raised together, almost, I might say, though he came from a big, high-toned family, while I couldn't tell who my granddaddy was to save my soul, an' he'dn't a second pair o' britches to my name. Even when we grew up this big difference didn't make no difference—we was together much as ever—af I had a dollar fer every meal I've ett in his house, I could buy out every payin' mine in Arizony, an' still hev money enough to run 'em day an' night!"

Easy Elbert laughed softly at this hyperbole, then brought the veteran back to the point by asking:

"You said that you remember me when I was very young—or something to that effect; never mind the exact words."

"Sartin—I couldn't be surer ef you was my own young 'un. I made a powerful heap o' you, them days."

"Strange that I can remember nothing of it—and yet my memory on all other points is remarkably retentive. Was I much with you and my father?"

"Taggin' at our heels the hull blessed time," was the eager response. "Huntin' or fishin' or anythin' else, it was all the same—thar you was, a teenty bit o' cuss, but even then plucky an' chuck full o' sand. Why I 'member one day when we was all—"

Easy Elbert raised his white hand, and Old '49 paused.

"I reckon we've struck bed-rock at last, my dear sir," the dashing sport said, showing his teeth with a pleasant smile. "I never saw my father—he died before I was born. If you still doubt my word, and can satisfy me that you are actuated by anything more than curiosity or a fancied memory of the past, I am ready to make affidavit to this fact, or take an oath on the Bible to that effect."

Old '49 stood as one petrified, the smile upon his rugged features changed to a sickly grin. But when Easy Elbert touched his hat and turned to move away, he broke the spell and leaping forward, checked the young man.

Easy Elbert flung off his hand, and there was a cold, stern expression upon his handsome face as he spoke:

"I don't want to be rude, old man, but this game is about played. I've listened to your nonsense with more patience than I would show most men, because of your kindness back there, but I say once for all that you are barking up the wrong tree. I am not, never was, never will be Ethelbert Graindorge."

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER SURPRISE FOR EASY ELBERT.

SHARP and clear these words were uttered, an impatient frown corrugating Easy Elbert's brows, but as he noticed the almost pitiable condition of the old man—his mingled confusion and dismay—his trembling limbs and ghastly countenance—the look of dazed doubt in his eyes—his frown vanished and his voice regained its former music.

"I don't want to be too hard on you, my good fellow, but you wouldn't take a simple denial for an answer, and I have enough sins of my own to answer for, without assuming the responsibilities of another. Mind, I'm not saying anything against your young friend; for aught I can say to the contrary, he may be a marvel of probity. But then, again, he may be an infernal rascal."

"You ain't him—you ain't Ethelbert Graindorge?" muttered Old '49, like one not fully conscious of what he was saying.

"No, I am not Ethelbert Graindorge. As for you, old fellow, I'm afraid you're going to be sick—you look like a ghost! Let me help you to the hotel and call a doctor. This awkward mistake has knocked you endways—"

"No!" and Old '49 shook off the hand that touched his shoulder. "Ef it was him that axed me, I'd go, free as air, fer I do feel mighty queer 'bout the upper level—but not 'long o' you! The Lord forgive me ef I'm doin' ye an onjustice, but I can't make it come right thet

ye ain't Ethelbert Graindorge—though why ye should lie about sech a little thing to a old man like me, I don't know!"

Easy Elbert could not help frowning at the unreasoning obstinacy of the old fellow, and thoroughly out of patience, he cried:

"Think what you please, but don't bore me on the subject any more. My stock of patience can't last forever, and I may be driven into giving you an answer that wouldn't be pleasant to either of us!"

Turning on his heel, he strode rapidly toward the Occidental Hotel, never once taking a backward glance. Even if he had, he would have learned nothing. Old '49 stood where left, his head and shoulders bowed—but the dazed, bewildered look had vanished from his face and eyes. Instead, there was a hungry, wolfish glare, mingled with an air of triumph that was almost demoniacal.

Easy Elbert saw nothing of this, yet there was almost as startling a change in his own countenance as he strode rapidly on to his hotel. Powerful emotion was written in every feature—his blue eyes were full of an expression that required little imagination to interpret as a hunted look. His lips were white, and they quivered as though speaking, but no audible words came from them.

As he neared the hotel, and saw a number of men standing on the piazza, he schooled his features by a mighty effort, nodding and smiling pleasantly as he passed them by. All looked at him curiously, but none ventured to address him, though it was clear that the story of his adventure with the cowboys at Mack's Place had already reached the hotel.

Entering his own room and locking the door behind him, Easy Elbert dropped into a chair.

"What does it all mean?" he muttered, supporting his elbows on his knees, his chin resting on his tightly-clinched fists, while his face was white and ghastly as that of a galvanized corpse. "She here—and that man after Ethelbert Graindorge! Am I to be forever haunted by the black past?"

For a few moments he sat in silence, moodily staring at his reflection in the glass which depended from the opposite wall. Then, as he noticed what an utter change had been wrought in his personal appearance, he raised his head with a defiant toss, a low, reckless laugh seemed to bring back the color to his lips, and outwardly at least he was once more Easy Elbert, the dandy sport.

"That's better!" and he nodded approvingly at his smiling image. "I ran down here in hopes of taking a rest, and seem to have plunged over head and ears into a hornet's nest—but what matter? It won't be the first labyrinth I've fought my way out of, aided by good luck, and that same 'cheek' Old '49 was forced to admire."

"Who and what is he? Not what he pretends—that much is clear. He don't look like a fool, yet he made a fearful botch of that 'old pard' business. Or—was it a blunder?" and Easy Elbert's brows came together in a dark frown. "By heavens! I begin to believe the cunning rascal was playing a part within a part! Strange that I did not detect it ere this! But the sight of her face, so gloriously beautiful, so unexpected, threw me off my balance. I hardly knew what I was saying. No doubt my face betrayed me—bah!" he ejaculated, with another defiant toss of his brown curls. "Suppose it did betray me—where are his proofs? Let him look out for himself if he crowds me too close, or he will find that Easy Elbert can be hard—a harder nut than his jaws can crack!"

Arising, the dandy sport flung his perforated hat on the bed, donning a black velvet cap instead. Replacing the two shots he had fired at Jack Irish with fresh cartridges, he slipped the revolver back into its secret pocket, then left the room and entered the office and bar-room combined.

The proprietor acted as his own clerk, and, cordially returning the dandy sport's nod, leaned across the counter and said, in an earnest but guarded tone:

"I don't want to make too free, Mr. Gray, but if you'll take a friend's advice you'll keep your eyes peeled and not take the air without being well heeled. Those cowboys hang together like a bunch of burs—touch one and they'll all prick! The fellow that came here after Doc said that the round-up wasn't over yet—"

"So much the worse for them, then," laughed Easy Elbert, as he lighted a cigar. "I told them where I could be found, and if they insist on having another dance, I'll furnish all the music they want, never you fear."

"You can do it, if anybody—"

"Just so," said the dandy sport, cutting the compliment short. "I have an engagement to fulfill which will keep me an hour or two. It is barely possible that our friends, the bullwhackers, may call during my absence, though I hardly think that is likely. If they should do so, however, tell them I will be back to supper this evening, if not earlier. And—both for safe keeping and as a guarantee that I am not fleeing from the match to come—please lock this change up in your safe," tossing a heavy, flat package

of bank-notes upon the counter, and then leaving the hotel without pausing for the landlord's reply.

Despite his apparent carelessness, Easy Elbert saw everybody and everything that stirred around him as he walked briskly up the street, as any one would have quickly discovered by attempting to "get the drop" on him. No such attempt was made, however, for the cowboys were still busied with their wounded comrade, and Old '49—supposing him the enemy that Easy Elbert now believed—had disappeared.

When fairly clear of the town, Easy Elbert grew more and more thoughtful and seemed wandering at random, for he soon left the road and turned into a side gulch, following its windings mechanically, a vacant stare in his blue eyes, seeming years older than when he first strolled down the street of Purgatory. A vast change from the careless, easy, imperturbable dandy sport his friends so often caught themselves envying. His face was deeply lined—he looked a decade older than his thirty-and-odd years, instead of passing for as many less. If this change was not caused by the memory of past crimes, then his face flatly belied itself. If Old '49 could have seen him then, he might have taken a sweet revenge for his defeat—if defeat it was.

Easy Elbert knew little and cared less whether his footsteps were leading him. He seemed suffocating while in town—his brain could not work clear while the blank walls of that little chamber hampered him. Now they were too active for comfort. They revealed to him deadly peril on all sides—from at least three different quarters.

"Not bad for an hour's work!" he exclaimed, with a short, hard laugh, baring his feverish brow and throwing himself down beside a gray, moss-grown rock. "That bullwhacker will egg his mates on to try and rub me out for those raps I gave him over the fingers. So much I care little for. Brutes of their caliber are easily dealt with. But the other—Old '49 as he calls himself—is of very different metal, unless I mistake. What set him on the trail of Ethelbert Graindorge? I hoped, believed, that matter was dead and forgotten. Will the past *never* die? Must it ever crop up, just when I fancy myself most remote from it?"

For some little space there was silence on his part, though it was clear enough that his thoughts were busy as ever; his face would have been but a sorry sight to his best friends during those moments.

With a knife which he drew from his bosom Easy Elbert was slicing and carving the ground. Unconsciously to himself his hand shaped a head in profile, and even with such rude material there was a likeness so strong that he at length noticed it. For an instant he stared at it, then drove his knife to the hilt in the center of the senseless image.

"That will be my answer, Old '49, if you crowd me too hard!" he said, his white teeth gleaming into a momentary smile.

"After all," he added, as before, speaking barely above his breath, "after all, he is not the one to be most dreaded. I can deal with him, or any man, but *she*—there's the rub!"

Whatever the connection between Easy Elbert and that vision of glorious beauty which Old '49 had called "Wild Kate," it could not have been all disagreeable, judging from the changes which swept so rapidly over his features—now dark, now light; now frowning, with eyes that glowed red, with close-drawn lips and teeth so firmly set that round, hard knots showed where his jaws were jointed; now smiling until the light in his eyes grew soft and humid, his drawn features relaxing, his whole appearance being that of one lying in a blissful, half-waking dream.

For an hour or more Easy Elbert lay thus, when he was conscious of a living shape slowly crossing his field of vision. Instantly his day-dreaming was shattered, his every sense on the full alert, for such was the training of a wild life, where every shadow might contain a strong hand armed against his life. But almost as quickly his strained muscles relaxed again, for he saw that the shape was that of a girl—of Mabel Wilder—though, of course, he was still in the dark as to her identity.

His curiosity was fully aroused by such a vision of grace and beauty in a wild, lonely spot like this, and he lay still, only bending the top of a little bush so that it might more completely conceal his form.

The reader has already been informed of what followed—of the dastardly behavior of Hugh Hardaway. Easy Elbert watched and listened, with rapidly growing contempt and indignation. Then, as Hard Hugh more completely flung aside the mask—when his heavy hand closed upon the frightened girl and wrung from her lips that cry for aid—the dandy sport reached the bank of the creek in half a dozen short, swift paces, then gathered himself and shot through the air with the ease and grace of a panther, alighting beside Hugh Hardaway before that person noticed his coming. Grasped by throat and thigh, the burly speculator was raised from his footing and hurled head-foremost into the deepest portion of the little pool.

Luckily for him that it was of considerable depth, else his brains might have been dashed out, or his neck broken upon the rocky bottom. Even as it was, the shock proved a severe one, and as he rose to the surface, gasping and strangling, blood was flowing down over his face.

Mabel, with a low cry staggered back against the rock wall, and Easy Elbert, a glance showing him that she had come to no harm, gave all his attention to the ruffian he had so unceremoniously handled.

"Paddle ashore, you clumsy brute—would you drown yourself in water not knee deep?" he called out sharply, as Hard Hugh splashed and floundered awkwardly in the pool, swallowing more unadulterated water than had entered his stomach since he attained his majority.

Taken utterly by surprise, being hurled into the water before he realized more than that *something* had alighted beside and clutched him, with the added shock of striking the rocky bottom, Hard Hugh might easily have met the fate Easy Elbert began to fear, only for that sharp call. The rascal was recalled to his senses and floundered ashore, dashing the water and blood from his eyes, glaring around in quest of the man who had so humbled him.

A short, mocking laugh guided his eyes, and an ugly snarl shook the bloody spray from his huge beard as he beheld Easy Elbert standing beside Mabel Wilder, on the opposite side of the creek. His right hand shot into his bosom, but the revolver he sought was not there—had fallen from its secret sheath into the water.

Easy Elbert saw the action and read it aright. Quick as thought his own weapon was drawn and covering Hard Hugh, while the voice of the dandy sport rung out menacingly:

"Go slow, fellow! Draw knife or pistol, and you'll never finger them again. Out with your hand, and empty, too!"

Sullenly Hugh Hardaway obeyed, showing his teeth like a desperate wolf when penned in beyond all escape.

"It's gone—lost out in the water where you pitched me by sneaking up behind—or I'd show you how little I care for your threats," he snarled, facing the leveled revolver without flinching or betraying the slightest symptoms of fear.

Whatever his faults—and he had many vile ones—even his worst enemy could not truthfully accuse Hugh Hardaway of being a personal coward.

Easy Elbert laughed softly as he lowered his pistol hand, though still keeping the weapon at full cock and his finger on the trigger.

"You mistake, fellow. I never threaten. I simply state facts, then prove them to be such if the necessity arises. True, I tossed you into the water—and I ask pardon of the little fishes for sending them such vile company—but you deserved far greater punishment for your cowardly insults to this young lady, when you believed she was helplessly in your power."

"Are you through?" asked the defeated man, with a quietness that was far more impressive than the wildest outburst.

"Not quite," coolly answered the dandy sport. "I intend spending a few days in this vicinity, and if I ever hear of your molesting this lady—or any other, for that matter—I promise to hunt you up and furnish you with a bath of something considerably hotter than spring water."

"Maybe I'll do the hunting—and if I do, you'll stay here longer than a few days—stay here until the crack o' doom."

"I'll try and be at home when you call," with a laugh.

"What name shall I ask for when I send in my card?"

"Ask for Easy Elbert—the Occidental is my hotel," the dandy sport replied, really amazed by the cool impudence displayed by the fellow. "Have you done?"

"Almost. My name is Hugh Hardaway. I have my headquarters at present in Purgatory. You hold over me at present, but the game is not ended yet. Look to yourself—"

"I mean to do so," Easy Elbert interrupted, his voice growing harder. "You have said enough—now go!"

Hard Hugh showed his teeth in a devilish smile, then turned on his heel and strode away down the little valley, never once turning his head to glance back.

Easy Elbert watched him for a few moments, then a gentle touch on his arm caused him to turn, once more the suave, polished gentleman he usually seemed.

"I owe you many thanks, sir—" began Mabel, still trembling, still suffering from the severe ordeal through which she had been compelled to pass.

Easy Elbert saw this, and considerably checked her.

"Please consider them already spoken, lady, if you think thanks are really necessary. On the contrary, I should apologize for making you the witness of such a scene. But I saw that rascally fellow was annoying you, and disliking to shoot him, I did the best I could on the spur of the moment."

"He deserved that, and more!" cried the

maiden, with a flash of reviving spirit. "But I regret the affair even more on your account than my own. I fear you have made an implacable enemy, sir—"

"Better that than his friendship," Easy Elbert laughed, carelessly. "A barking dog seldom bites. He knew that I would not fire on an unarmed man, and his show of courage was more for your benefit than mine. I beg of you to feel no uneasiness on my behalf. Now—may I ask if you are far from home? You are stopping in town?"

Mabel cast a quick glance around her, then replied, a little uneasily, as Easy Elbert fancied: "I wandered further than I thought. I am nearly two miles—"

"Then you must suffer me to escort you, at least until you are within sight of your home," the dandy sport said, quickly. "It is barely possible that that rascal may sneak back this way, and cause you further annoyance should he find you alone. You will grant me permission?"

Mabel blushing assented. This stranger was so very handsome, so stylish in manner, so polite and considerate, that it is hardly to be wondered at that her foolish little heart was fluttering, far from unpleasantly. Not that it swerved from its allegiance to long-limbed Periander Pettigrew, but her natural girlish vanity was flattered, and after a few moments she quite forgot all about Hugh Hardaway and his threats, listening to the soft, mellow voice of the stranger, or answering him shyly.

There was not much in their conversation that would interest the general reader, though little Mabel found it very delightful, and even Easy Elbert was far from being bored. Certain it is that Mabel did not choose the most direct route home, nor hurry her footsteps greatly, though the sun was almost setting. But there comes an end to all things, however pleasant, and at last the young couple came in sight of Mabel's home.

As she pointed it out, Easy Elbert noted the buildings around the mouth of the mine beyond, and a sudden suspicion struck him. Though they had chatted so busily and freely, the maiden had not given him her name. Now he was on the point of asking her to favor him with it, when Mabel extended one fair hand and pointed down the road leading from Purgatory.

"Look! yonder comes my sister. Is she not a magnificent rider?"

Easy Elbert's face turned white as a corpse. Despite the intervening distance, he recognized the woman who had passed him but a few hours before in Purgatory.

The startled gaze of his fair companion recalled his wits in a measure, and he hurriedly uttered:

"Pardon me—I have just remembered a very important engagement. You are home, now. Adieu!"

Turning on his heel he strode swiftly back the way they had come.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHO IS EASY ELBERT?"

EASY ELBERT was right in one respect—Hard Hugh was not content to suffer the rich prize which he so coveted to escape him without an effort to redeem the vantage he had lost. True, he strode away without looking back until one of the bends in the crooked little valley hid him from the view of those beside the pool, but then a sudden and complete change came over the burly speculator.

Dropping into a little draw that ran obliquely into the valley, he sped along for a few rods, then pressed through a clump of bushes just in time to see Mabel Wilder turn toward home, accompanied by the dandy sport.

A fierce scowl curled his fierce mustaches, and there was death in his red-flaming eyes as he watched the handsome, graceful couple more leisurely up the valley.

"She's in no such great hurry now, curse her!" he growled, swift jealousy adding fresh fuel to his fiery rage. "She hugs up to him like a sick kitten to a hot brick. Curse the luck that lost my barker! I'd kill that dandified dog and put her where she'd be glad to come to terms."

His evil eyes followed the young couple until a bend in the valley hid them from view, then he returned to the little pool and rescued his hat from where it had drifted against a rock. His revolver was invisible, and Hard Hugh made no attempt to recover it, only pausing long enough to wash the blood from his face, then turning and hastening back to Purgatory.

After a fashion very different from his customary style, Hard Hugh, his cocked hat pulled far down over his brows, hastened along by the most deserted paths, reaching and entering his small but neat-looking and substantial office from the rear.

Hurriedly changing his clothes and removing the few remaining traces of blood from his face, Hugh Hardaway opened the front door and looked out. A savage gleam lighted up his face as he beheld a man slowly moving along hard by, and having attracted his attention by a shrill whistle, he motioned him to approach.

"Come in; I was looking for some one to send after you," he said, closing and locking the door as the man slipped past him.

"Yar I be, boss, ready fer business jist as soon as I git the word go," was the response, in a pleasant-sounding voice that formed a strong contrast to the face of its owner.

A face that would have been fairly hideous and loathsome only for the strong element of grotesqueness which it contained. For all that was known to the contrary, the man might at one time have been superlatively handsome, for it was plain that his present appearance was the result of some terrible accident.

His body was bent to one side like a strung bow, throwing his right shoulder much the highest. His arms were both very crooked, as though the bones between each joint had been broken and suffered to knit again without being properly adjusted. But his face was still more conspicuous. One mass of scars, some of a dirty white hue, others bright red, and one or two of a dark purple. One eye was missing; the other was so red and bloodshot, yet bright and glittering, that it resembled nothing so much as a living coal of fire. The bridge of his nose had been broken, the base divided nearly in the center, up and down, healing so that each nostril seemed independent of the other, and moving curiously with each word that he spoke. Not a spear of hair grew on his face or skull, though the latter was hidden from view by a dirty silk handkerchief being drawn lightly over it, two slits in the cloth allowing his ears to protrude. Each corner of his mouth was drawn upward, giving one at first glance the impression that the fellow was laughing—and from this fact came the name by which he was known far and wide through the mining towns: Laughing Leo. If he had any other name, he alone was aware of the fact, and kept his secret closely. In fact, he seemed proud of the name—proud of his terrible disfiguration, courting remark instead of shunning it as one would naturally suppose.

A wild, reckless character was Laughing Leo, fond of a fight, fond of displaying his strength and activity, remarkable in one so deformed, vain of his marvelous skill with all weapons used in the border-land, a bit of a bully when he had been drinking, but unlike most of that ilk, never assailing a man unawares or imposing on one unable to defend himself. Hence, despite his grotesque hideousness and his dangerous character, Laughing Leo was very popular among the rough element, and no man in Purgatory had more or firmer friends than he.

"Sit down—moisten your throat," said Hugh Hardaway, placing a decanter and glasses on the little round table. "You know nearly everybody in these parts, I believe. Have you ever met a dandified young fellow that calls himself Easy Elbert?"

"Never chanced to meet the gent, but I've heard tell of him," was the prompt reply. "Fact is, he's somewhar in town—"

"I know that. Who and what is he—that's the question. If you don't know, I want you to find out. Name your own price for the work, but remember I want the *truth*."

"Jest one question fust, boss. Which is he—fri'nd or inemy?"

"Enemy!" growled Hard Hugh, his eyes glowing savagely.

"Then I don't reckon you need go down into your britches at all. Thar's a dose cooking fer the young feller that'll be his last sickness, sure!"

"What do you mean?" eagerly demanded the speculator.

"You know them four bullwhackers, with Jack Irish at the head, that's bin cavortin' round here so mighty brash?"

Hugh Hardaway nodded, and then listened breathlessly as Laughing Leo tersely narrated the events which had taken place that day, telling a straight story, though it was at second hand, since he had been out of town and only returned after the fun was over.

"Big Jack is red-hot over it, an' he's eggin' his mates on to tackle the sport ag'in, an' I reckon they'll do it, too. They're hard nuts, an' I'm bettin' long odds that this Easy Elbert gets sent over the range afore another sun!" concluded Laughing Leo, again sampling the whisky.

"He played with them once—he may get the better of them again," muttered Hardaway, frowning blackly. "Thousand devils! how his cursed face haunts me! Where have I seen it before? I'd give a thousand dollars to know just who and what he is!"

"It needn't cost ye anythin' nigh that much, boss," said Laughing Leo, with a short laugh at the sudden start which the speculator gave.

In fact, Hard Hugh had spoken unconsciously aloud, and for an instant it seemed almost as though this man was given the power of reading his inmost thoughts. But he quickly rallied, for he felt that Laughing Leo was thoroughly to be trusted—as sure and secret as the grave.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, sharply. "You said you knew nothing of the fellow personally—"

"No more I don't," was the prompt rejoinder, "but thar's Ben Davis. Unless he lies like

thunder he kin tell all ye want to know. 'Twas him that told me 'bout the circus—"

"Go fetch him here, at once. If he is drunk, as usual, sober him up with a drench from a horse-bucket."

Laughing Leo nodded, and the corners of his mouth curled still nearer to his ears. Hard Hugh opened the door and let his acolyte out, then resumed his seat, his brow black-drawn, his eyes glowing redly as he sat staring fixedly at the blank wall, elbows on table and clinched fists supporting his chin. Now and then inarticulate growls came from his bull-throat, and his strong teeth grated together in a manner that told how far from pleasant were his thoughts.

Thus he still sat when a rap on the door announced the return of his messenger, and hastily rising, Hugh Hardaway gave admittance to Laughing Leo and another. This was a small man, light limbed and bodied, not much larger than many a school-boy just entering his teens. His complexion was dark as that of an Indian, and rumor said that he was closely allied to that people, though the aspersion was bitterly resented by the desperado-in-miniature. His skin was soft and smooth as that of the lad for which he was often mistaken; but there were lines in his face that told of wild excess and passions such as no lad ever knew.

Only the "wild West" of our own land could have given birth to such a creature, or, if it must be added, suffered him to roam at large, much less live on for years.

Not five feet tall by several inches, Ben Davis was neither a dwarf nor deformed. On the contrary, the most critical sculptor could not have found fault with his limbs or produced a figure more perfectly proportioned or symmetrical from sole to crown. Small as he was, light as his weight, there were few men who knew Ben Davis that would care to risk much wealth on a tussle with him, even when all weapons save those furnished by nature were barred. That soft skin covered muscles as strong, pliant and tireless as the finest oil-tempered steel. A cat was not more active or sure in its movements than he. He seemed to know no fear, and when about half-drunk he was as dangerous company as a package of dynamite. No one could be certain that the wild, fierce fancy to begin cutting and shooting promiscuously would not take complete possession of him at any instant. A score of similar mad freaks could be enumerated, each of which had ended in bloodshed and death, while it was Ben Davis's boast that his skin was as yet unmarred by scar of bullet or steel. He himself declared that he bore a charmed life, that the devil had pledged him immunity for a certain number of years, and there were many otherwise sensible men who were firmly convinced that he spoke no more than the truth. On a dozen different occasions, by those whom he had injured, or whose friends or relatives had fallen by his hand, his life was attempted, only to fail disastrously, and serve to still further clinch the opinion of the public as recorded above.

Just now the little fire-eater presented a doleful rather than an awe-inspiring spectacle, his long, straight black hair dripping water over his buckskin garments, his eyes half closed, his thin lip pouting like a sullen school-boy just roused from an untimely nap by a *douche* of cold water.

"Drunk again, Davis?" spoke Hardaway, sternly.

"Not now, boss," and the pouting lip changed to a half-sheepish smile. "Beauty-boy stuck my *cabega* in a water-bucket, 'fore I knowed what struck me—"

"You know what I threatened? If your word cannot be depended upon in a trifling matter like this—" added Hard Hugh in a stern voice, but he was cut short by the manikin.

"Ef you only sent fer me to cuss an' rip an' t'ar all 'round, reckon I'll pull out till ye git in a better humor."

"Well, you know yourself that you are too reckless and free of tongue whenever you have a little liquor aboard—"

"Them as don't like my style needn't bitch on. I kin hoe my own row, an' ax odds o' nobody. You're a big man in more ways than one, Hard Hugh, but you ain't got no call to put on frills over me. You wanted work done—I wanted money, an' did a dirty job or two fer you—but I alays give you the worth o' your money—"

"Of course you did—who's denying it?" interrupted the speculator in a placable tone, for he saw that the little rascal was in one of his dangerous moods, when a single word might lead to an explosion. "I was only speaking for your own good—"

"That's all right, then. But nobody don't like to be jawed an' preached at jest 'cause he's tuck mebbe a drop o' liquor more than he kin kerry level. An' that durned cuss ketched me from ahind by the heels an' soused me in a hoss-trough like I was a blind kitten—"

"Don't turn on me, or I'll run like a turkey!" cried Laughing Leo, in mock affright. "The boss wanted to see you on business, in a hurry, an' I didn't know any easier way to sober ye up."

"You'll try your fool-tricks oncet too often, Beauty-bird," snapped the little spitfire, then turning to Hardaway: "Was it another one o' his lies when he said you wanted me on 'portant business?"

"I asked him to bring you here—yes. There's been a row in town, this afternoon, I understand."

"Jest a little monkey-show," sniffed Davis, his nose in the air. "Five shots fired, nobody killed, an' only one man tetched—Jack Irish, the big bullwhacker that's been drivin' his fo'-in-hand rough-shod all through Purgatory."

"What sort of a snag was it he run against to-day?"

"Jest chain-lightnin' wrapped up in honey!" Davis declared, his eyes glittering. "Easy Elbert they call him, an' he is easy as a old moccasin ontel somebody undertakes to rub him the wrong way o' the fur—then wake snakes an' hunt yer holes! Men *do* say I ain't no slouch myself, when the notion strikes me to git up on my hind legs an' howl—but I'm free to own thet I ain't no more'n a minner 'longside of a whale when he turns loose in good airnest."

Hugh Hardaway's black brows grew blacker than ever as he listened to this burst of enthusiasm, a l the more emphatic for coming from one who seldom had a word of praise for either friend or foe. Already he hated this dandy sport as only men of his thoroughly evil nature can hate, and if Ben Davis spoke the truth, it would not be so easy to carry out the scheme of revenge he had already formed. But he managed to hide his thoughts, and said, quietly enough:

"You speak as though you knew him well. Who is he? What is his business? Where did he come from, and what is his business in these parts?"

"One mouthful at a time is all a man o' my size kin chew at once, boss. Say it ag'in, an' put it slower."

"You know this fellow who calls himself Easy Elbert?"

"I know him by sight as well as I do you, but he ain't a man as uses overly much with the sort o' company that suits my taste. They ain't nothin' high-toned 'bout me! They is *him*. One o' the gilt-edged sports. Uses more 'fumery then whisky. Talks as smooth an' soft whenever he comes ag'in a common critter, though, as ef he was a stuck-upper."

"You don't know his real name, then?"

"Jest Easy Elbert's all I ever heard him called."

"A sport, you said?"

"Yes. Flips the pasteboards fer a livin', an' what he don't know about 'em ain't wuth findin' out."

"You have no idea what brought him here? Of course I mean his object in coming to this place."

"Not a durned idee—nur I wouldn't like to be the one that 'd ax him so, nuther."

"You consider him a 'bad man,' then?"

"Now you're shootin'! Boss, you've knowed me these last three y'ars, an' in that len'th o' time I reckon you've found out somethin' 'bout the sort o' stuff I'm made of, too. I don't make no brags. I leave that to them as needs that kind o' proppin' up to make 'em look like a man. But I tell ye honest, I've see'd this Easy Elbert face odds that 'd send a cold shiver o' fear playin' up an' down my backbone—an' all the time he looked soft as silk, smilin' as easy an' sweet as a sleepin' baby—ontel the time for business come. Then the band begun to play—an' you jest bet your boots thar *was* music while it lasted! Take my davy I see a plum dozen Easy Elberts slashin' round thar—an' when the circus was over, thar he was, jest as soft and with that same durned smile on his face, though *nine* dead men lay toes up, an' he was leakin' blood from a dozen holes. That's the kind o' kitten he is!"

"I've met him somewhere, and thought maybe you could freshen my memory; but it don't matter much," said the speculator, sternly. "I will probably meet him myself, unless this affair with the cowboys frightens him away."

Ben Davis laughed, almost sneeringly.

"It's plain you *don't* know the critter, or you wouldn't speak like that. No three men ain't goin' to run Easy Elbert out o' town, an' I'm ready to lay my pile, even up, that ef they crowd the sport as they sw'ar they will, he'll fix the hull lot ready fer plantin' afore they kin git in one squar' lick at him."

"You think they mean to attack him, then?" asked Hard Hugh, with an eagerness that he could not entirely conceal.

"They *say* so, an' I reckon they'll try it on. They've got "sand" enough, but they're too slow to stan' much show with a bun'le o' greased lightnin'—which he is."

"Well, may we all be there to see the fun," said Hardaway, rising from his chair as a signal that the interview was at an end. "Of course you will remain in town—"

"Sartin! Wouldn't miss seein' them bullwhackers git thar eyes opened an' shet fer no money," declared the little fire-eater, with a diabolical grin.

Hugh Hardaway closed the door behind them, then sunk into his chair and resumed his for-

mer position. His scowl was deeper than ever, his black eyes filled with a light that was almost satanic. The mask he usually wore while under the eyes of others was now dropped from his face, and his evil nature stood revealed in all its deformity. Unconsciously to himself, audible words fell from his lips:

"Curse him, and curse the evil luck that brought him there just as I was having it all my own way! Another minute and she would have yielded—she would have pledged me her word, or I'd have carried her away to a safe spot, where she would have to yield, by persuasion or by force! Now the little fool will tell all, and—"

Hugh Hardaway ceased muttering, and leaping to his feet he flung the door open, looking eagerly down the street in the direction taken by Ben Davis and Laughing Leo.

They were still in sight, and as the speculator gave vent to a shrill whistle, they turned their heads and looked back.

Up went Hard Hugh's right hand, making a peculiar signal, and Laughing Leo instantly retraced his steps. Davis lingered for a moment, but as the operator stepped back into his office without making any further sign, he turned and kept on his way.

Laughing Leo entered the office, a look of curiosity in his one eye. Hard Hugh closed the door, then spoke:

"I come very near forgetting one of my reasons for wishing to see you. How many of the boys do you think you can collect on short notice?"

"A dozen—mebbe more. I hain't bin 'round much to-day."

"See that they are notified, then, to rendezvous at the old spot. There's work on hand. See that all come sober, for there must be no blundering, and we may have to do some fighting."

"You don't mean that Easy Elbert?" asked Laughing Leo, quickly.

"You have your orders—I didn't call you back to ask questions," sharply uttered Hard Hugh. "You can go."

Laughing Leo beat a retreat without another word, and when the door closed behind him, form, Hugh Hardaway once more sat down, thinking hard and fast.

CHAPTER VII.

FRIEND OR ENEMY?

It was after dark when Easy Elbert returned to Purgatory and sought his room at the Occidental. How he had passed the intervening hours, no one could even surmise from his face, as smooth and smiling as though his pathway through life was all sunshine, all roses and no thorns or storms. Yet, during the last few hours, he had received successive shocks, had passed through an ordeal that would have broken down ninety-nine men out of a hundred.

As he struck a match to light a candle, the dandy sport noticed a bit of paper lying on the table, which he felt sure was not there when he left the room. As by instinct his eyes roved swiftly around the chamber, but all else seemed exactly as he had left it, nor was there a single hiding-place where an enemy might lie in ambush to catch him off his guard.

Picking up the paper, Easy Elbert found that it contained writing, plainly intended for himself, though there was neither address nor signature. Bending over the dimly-burning candle, he read:

"If you are a wise man, you will bid adieu to Purgatory—stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once—is the well-meant advice of a sincere friend. If you are too foolish and headstrong to follow this wise counsel, sleep with your eyes open and finger on trigger. The cowboys have sworn to take your life, but that danger is the one least to be dreaded. *The past is not dead!* 'A word to the wise.' You are no fool."

Easy Elbert read this missive twice over, closely scanning each word, each letter, as though he hoped to thus find some clew to the writer—but if he succeeded, nothing in his face betrayed the fact as he slowly refolded the note.

At that moment there came a knock at his door. The dandy sport stepped swiftly and silently to one side while his right hand thrust the note into his bosom—and remained there.

"Come in," he cried, in his low but marvelously clear and distinct tones—and then was apparent the cause of his seemingly careless movement.

The door opened, but could not swing clear back for a chair standing behind it. A long cloak hung from a nail and cut off all view through the widening crack as the door swung open. To catch even a glimpse of Easy Elbert, the man who knocked must first fully enter the room.

This incident is mentioned as being strongly characteristic of the man. Careless and easy as most of his acquaintances deemed him, not a step or motion of his was made at random.

His invitation was promptly accepted, and Old '49 entered the room. As he recognized the man, a frown lowered the dandy sport's eyebrows for an instant, only to die away as soon

as born, and there was not a trace of unpleasantness in Easy Elbert's voice as he spoke:

"You wish to see me? Please be seated."

The veteran took the chair indicated, one brown hand stroking his shaggy beard with a slight nervousness that did not escape the keen-eyed sport. With a swift motion his right hand came out of his bosom and spread the mysterious note open before the veteran.

"You wrote this, I believe. May I ask your object?"

Old '49 made no response until after reading the lines—reading them slowly and carefully as though he, too, saw something important lying between the lines.

"No, I didn't write it. I never see or heered of it afore this minnit," he declared, his eyes meeting the gaze bent upon him with unflinching steadiness. "What made ye think I writ it?"

Easy Elbert folded the paper and placed it in his note-book.

"The interest you appear to take in my affairs made the inference a natural one, but since you repudiate the authorship, we'll say no more about it. Instead, may I ask to what I am indebted for this visit? Please pardon me if I seem abrupt, but I have not yet eaten supper."

"That letter you jest showed me ain't fur from tellin' all I came fer. I didn't write it, but it goes straight to the bull's-eye. Ef you're smart, you'll foller its advice. Better levant—supper or no supper—or you'll turn toes up afore mornin'!"

"I hope you do not utter this as a threat?" smiled the sport.

"No: I say it beca'se it's the sober truth, an' beca'se I'd mighty hate to see ye rubbed out without a fa'r shake fer your life."

"You are very kind," and the voice of the smiling sport was as soft and gentle as the lazy purring of a contented cat. "Not many men in these matter-of-fact days would take so much trouble on behalf of a perfect stranger. Tell me frankly why you feel such an interest in me and my affairs?"

"All 'long o' your pap," was the prompt response. "We was side pardners long time ago. Brotherly love wasn't a tit on a fat hog 'long-side o' what we felt fer each other. Ef he sneezed, I ketched a cold out o' pure sympathy, an' ef I tuck a horn too much, it made him drunk quicker'n it did me. An' when he was turnin' toes up, what did my old mate say? Axed me to keep a eye onto you, an' ef ever the day come when I could lend ye a fri'ndly boost, to do it in the name o' my old pard. I said I would—an' yar I be."

"A very touching instance of friendship stronger than death," softly laughed Easy Elbert. "What a pity it is not true!"

"Hev you got a Bible handy fer me to take my davy on?" earnestly uttered the veteran.

"I don't deal in the article," laughed the sport. "If it is as you say, if you take such a strong interest in my affairs, why have we been strangers so long? How came it that you neglected your sacred charge until now?"

"Ca'se I was a pesky fool," declared the veteran with admirable frankness. "I was always crazy over auctions, lotteries an' sich-like, an' when word come o' the diskivery o' gold in 'Forny, nothin' would do but I must be one o' the fust durned fools that made the rush overland. I got thar easy enough, but to save my lights I couldn't git away. Times without eend would I make enough to start back on, but jest as often would I git cleaned out afore I got a good ready to make the home-run. Once it was road-agents. Twice it was keards. More times yit I got tuck into camp by wimmen-critters. They was a spell onto me, I reckon. I couldn't git away. An' so it come that 'most everybody in the diggins got to know me, an' as the old residents died off, got killed or pulled out fer fresher pastur's, leavin' me thar in my glory, they come to call me 'Old '49.' I got to answerin' to the name, an' now it comes more nat'ral than that my folks give me when I was fust hatched."

Again Easy Elbert laughed, but there was a hard, metallic ring to the sound that spoke volumes.

"Come, this is played out. You did me a little service to-day, and in consideration of that fact, I was willing to overlook what followed. But now you thrust yourself upon me again, persisting in a ridiculous story which I know is false. Once more I ask, what is your object? Who are you, and why do you pretend such great interest in me?"

"Beca'se your father an' me was old side-pardners—"

"Bah! by your own words I proved the shallowness of that claim. If it was true, would you come in such careful disguise?"

The veteran's eyes and mouth opened in admirably counterfeited surprise, but the dandy sport was not deceived.

"Your beard is a false one—wonderfully well made and adjusted, but none the less a fraud," he said, sharply.

"You know who I be, then?" slowly uttered Old '49.

"No; so far as I can tell, I never set eyes

upon you before to-day. Remove your disguise, and I may be able to solve the mystery. But one point is pretty well settled. Instead of being my friend, you are my enemy."

"Was it the part of a enemy I played to-day down to Mack's Place?" demanded Old '49.

"Possibly," was the quiet response. "There would be nothing so extraordinary in it. Men have hated so savagely, so thoroughly that they would fight to the death in defense of their enemy when others assailed him, only to claim his life afterward—"

"Right thar you've hit it!" interrupted the old man, his eyes aglow, his voice harsh and strained, the big veins swelling on his temples.

"All I told you was a lie. I ain't your friend—I never knowed your father, never knowed when he died, or but what he was still livin', an' only knowed his name through chance. I am the deadliest enemy you ever had or will hev. Years ago I swore to trail you down to death, an' I mean to keep that vow ef I live long enough."

"You have had chances enough to-day to make your oath good. May I ask why you held your hand—why you have put me on my guard? Why, man, I could end your death-hunt now, before you could raise a finger in self-defense, or utter a cry for help!"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. Jest so you thought you hed the dead open an' shet onto me last Chewsday week—"

"No more wild assertions, please," interposed Easy Elbert. "I never laid eyes on you before to-day—I can swear to that."

Old '49 pulled the disguise from his face and leaned forward so that the rays of the candle fell full upon him.

"Kin you say that now?" he demanded, hoarsely.

The dandy sport eyed him keenly, then responded:

"More positively than before. I never forget a face I once see, and I can take my Bible-oath that I never met you before to-day."

"You didn't 'hold me up' last Chewsday was a week, when I was ridin' a burro on the East Trail? You didn't try to find out my secret an' then bury me alive?"

"Most assuredly not, since you are alive and here," was the equable response. "I never botch my work. Those whom I bury are well content to lie still until awakened by the trump of Gabriel."

"It don't matter now," and Old '49 proceeded to warm the silk gauze lining of his disguise by the candle, before sticking it in place again.

"You hed your chance then, an' lost it. Ef you git another afore I do, it'll be my fault."

"You still doubt my word—bah! what matter?" and Easy Elbert laughed shortly. "You came here this evening to make sure of your revenge—to kill me?"

"No. I ain't dead sure you're Ethelbert Graindorge, or afore this you'd 'a' bin started on your way to the gallows. I've sworn to hunt you to death, but I don't mean to strike until I'm sure. You're my meat—I hold fust mortgage on ye. I was ready to fight fer you to-day, an' I'm ready to do the same to-night, rather then let any other man turn ye toes up, an' when I started here, they was riggin' up fer the war-path."

"And you want me to run away like a thief in the night, just to preserve my life that you may kill me, when the fancy strikes you—is that it?" laughed the dandy sport.

Old '49 nodded with the most matter-of-fact air imaginable.

"My dear sir, did you stop to consider what an incredibly foolish course you are following? You tell me that you mean to have my life, but that you will not strike until absolutely certain that I am the man you think. What would be easier than for me to settle the whole question by killing you?"

"I'm takin' all the chances," was the quiet response. "Ef you try to kill me, it'll only be 'cause you're guilty. I'll know then that you're Ethelbert Graindorge—"

"Small satisfaction to a dead man, I should think!"

"I won't be dead. You nor nobody else cain't kill me afore I've done the work sot afore me—an' that is to put the hangman's noose 'round the neck o' Ethelbert Graindorge."

"An oath for an oath, then," seriously uttered Easy Elbert. "Swear not to strike me from behind until you are positive that I am this Ethelbert Graindorge, and in return I swear not to molest or injure you in any manner whatever."

"It's a whack," promptly replied Old '49; then adding: "Bout these bullwhackers—you'll levant?"

"No. That is not my style. If they are bound to have satisfaction, I'll not balk them. They would run across me sooner or later, and I prefer to settle the matter at once. You say they were preparing for business when you came here?"

Old '49 nodded, but his brow was contracted.

"Very well. If you care to insure me a fair show, I'll accept your aid this far. Go out and learn where these gentle bull-thumpers are, then come and tell me. Will you do it?"

"Ef you're bound to run head-fust into it, I s'pose I must," growled the veteran, rising and leaving the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD '49 AS A SPY.

OLD '49 moved quickly enough until clear of the hotel, then his pace slackened until he came to a halt in the street. He bared his head to the cool mountain breeze, and looked up at the myriads of brightly-twinkling stars, as though to learn from them whether or no he had acted as foolishly as the first thought would seem to prove.

"It come out almost afore I thought," he muttered, barely above his breath. "Pears like I couldn't stop when I once said the fust word—an' that face afore me! I thought it'd be so easy—that my heart'd be like a stone, an' my narves like steel wires—that I could kill him inch by inch an' laugh when he axed for mercy, or begged me to putt him out o' his misery. I thought I could do it all, but that was afore I see him face to face. Now I hes to keep sayin' over an' over in my mind—*it's Ethelbert Graindorge the murderer, the thief, the liar, all that's wicked an' mean*—got to keep sayin' it over an' over to keep from thinkin' the hull is a ugly night-mar' dream that I'm jest awakin' up from. I've got to bite my lips till the blood comes, or I'd be callin' him that other name—ten thousand curses rest upon his head, living and dead!"

The fierce intensity with which these last words were uttered, roused Old '49 and sent him from the moonlight into the shadows with almost ludicrous suddenness. He glanced swiftly around him, hand on pistol, for the moment believing that other tongue than his own had uttered that fierce imprecation.

There was no one in sight. From down the street came a shrill, prolonged yell; the war-whoop, perhaps, of some lively chap who was spoiling for a fight—possibly the signal that Dick Knowdell and his fellow bullwhackers were rallying forth in quest of the dandy sport.

This sound recalled to Old '49 the mission he had undertaken, and the strange compact he had entered into with one whom he had solemnly sworn to bring to the gallows.

"It looks like a more then durn fool move on my part," he muttered, once more buried in deep thought, speaking as so many men do whose lives have been solitary and apart from their fellows for years, in audible tones, yet which did not affect his own ears. "Ef he is Ethelbert Graindorge, which he cain't be otherwise, it seems to me, he made that 'greement jest fer to throw dust in my eyes. He must know who I raaly be, an' knowin' that, it goes without sayin' that I'll never let up on him until the black past is paid fer as much as his dirty life kin rub out the score. He jest took the oath to throw me off my guard—then he'll strike hard an' sure—*mebbe!*" and the veteran gave a low, hard laugh that betokened a remarkable self-reliance.

"That's the very reason I said what I did. Ef he's squar'—ef I hev made a mistake, which don't seem possible—then he'll stick to the 'greement while I'm sittin' the matter to git down to bed-rock. Ef he ain't honest—ef he is Ethelbert Graindorge—then he'll watch his chance to slip a bit o' steel betwixt my ribs, or to sink a lead mine in my 'natomy. When he does make a move like that, I won't wait fer no better proof. I'll shet my eyes to that face o' his, an' close on him so fast an' sure that nothin' but the hangman's noose 'll ever set him free o' my death-grip!"

A man rapidly ran down the steps of the Occidental, and Old '49 crouched closer in the shadow, at first glance believing it was Easy Elbert, already on his trail; but as the man passed by he saw his mistake. The person was a stranger, with whom he could have no concern.

He stood still, deeply pondering. Should he go and hunt out the cowboys, as he had promised? If he should, and return to the hotel with his report, it was almost certain from what he had that day seen of the man that the dandy sport would at once hasten to confront the desperate men who were seeking him with the avowed purpose of taking his life in atonement for the injuries he had inflicted upon their comrades.

"When they come together ag'in, somebody's got to turn toes up, an' that somebody 'll 'most likely be him, with three sech p'izen critters to buck ag'inst. They know they've got to kill him, or git laughed out o' the kentry. He'll try to talk, as he did afore, an' right thar's whar they'll git the bulge onto him. Ef he's throwed cold, it 'll end my trailin'; but that don't suit my ideas. When he dies, he must know that he owes it all to my hand!"

Old '49 ceased muttering, and seeing that his weapons worked free in their sheaths, he moved down the street like one whose mind is fairly made up.

Much that has been said, and more that remains yet untold, may seem hardly credible to the reader, unless he or she chances to remember how frequently truth is stranger than fiction. The story that is told in these pages is a

true one so far as concerns the crime which furnishes the foundation, the characters of the avenger and the man he hunted, together with the strange relations they were forced to assume toward each other by the force of circumstances. After all, if regarded squarely, there is nothing so very extraordinary in the actions of Old '49, or that he should now be plotting for the safety of the man who, as he fully believed, less than a fortnight before had doomed him to a cruel death, either by slow suffocation or being crushed to a shapeless mass beneath a huge rock, for Old '49 and Peter Stroud, the New York lawyer, were one and the same person.

To which name he had the best right, or if either one revealed his rightful identity, need not be discussed here, but the reader has a right to know how the man contrived to escape from what appeared to all concerned almost certain and instantaneous death.

By glancing back to the opening chapter, it will be remembered that a lariat was wound around the body of the doomed man, pinning his arms to his sides, before he was placed in the shallow grave hollowed out by the men in black garb. In order to leave no traces above earth of his victim, the masked chief ordered his pistol-belt and weapons placed in the grave with him. This grave had been dug in the yellow clay, near the edge of the little creek that ran through the valley, and when the doomed man occupied it, face uppermost, his body was nearly a foot below the level.

If the chief noticed this, he cared little. The rock was so heavy that it would quickly crush the moist clay down to the level of his victim, even if the first tremendous shock did not do the work completely. So he reasoned, doubtless, but his hatred was fated to be baffled.

The huge mass of rock was toppled over, and all traces of the grave in which the prisoner lay were obliterated. Not one of the black men but would have sworn that the man was dead; yet he was alive, and uninjured save in a certain degree by the shock and sudden compression of the air as the clay settled beneath the immense weight—settled, but only for a few inches.

By one of those curious fatalities which mark the career of criminals and give them the appearance of "twisting the rope to hang themselves," the black gown, in marking out the grave of his intended victim, unconsciously selected a spot where there was a narrow fissure in a ledge of rock, above which lay a shallow strata of clay. When the huge rock was toppled over it was held above the doomed man and kept from crushing him by this ledge.

For a few minutes Peter Stroud—or Old '49, as he may better be termed—lay stunned by the shock, but then he quickly rallied, and found to his mingled joy and amazement that he was not only alive, but could move about in his grave!

The lariat had not been applied or tied with particular care, its only object being to prevent the prisoner from leaping out of the grave in a desperate effort to escape while the road-agents were essaying to overturn the rock, and with but little difficulty Old '49 slipped his right hand out of the rope coil, grasping and drawing his knife from its sheath. With its aid he quickly severed the lariat in each fold, then turned over upon his face and attacked the soft clay beyond his head.

It was tedious and slow work, cutting with one hand, pulling the dirt back with the other and pushing it to where he could work it still further back with his knees and feet. The air soon became impure, but he knew that he was working for life, and madman never labored more desperately than he did during that terrible, never-to-be-forgotten hour. And when his knife-hand was finally driven through, letting in the pure, fresh air to his almost asphyxiated lungs, he gave one gasping prayer of heartfelt thanksgiving, then lay like one dead until the sun set, the stars came out and the moon rose above the eastern range.

In the end Old '49 fought his way free, and, after fully considering the matter, turned back to Tolima, where he assumed his disguise as the returned Californian, and once more struck out for Purgatory, where he felt assured he would again encounter the black cowl, Ethelbert Graindorge, as he believed him.

What followed the reader already knows.

Old '49 was not obliged to search far or lose much time in finding the three cowboys. The information he gave Easy Elbert, concerning their desperate threats, was perfectly true. Left to themselves, they would hardly have taken the matter so seriously, but Jack Irish, believing himself crippled for life, urged them to avenge his wrongs, never ceasing until they swore to hunt the dandy sport down to death. And even at this early hour they were on the war-path, followed by a motley crowd eager to see the "circus," going from place to place and drinking freely, looking for Easy Elbert, as they declared.

Old '49 heard loud voices in one of the larger, more reputable saloons and gambling-houses, the Big Bonanza, as it was termed, and entering, found Dick Knowdell and his two partners present, drinking and talking loudly. Never-

theless they were on their guard, facing the door and observing Old '49 the instant he entered. Their hands grasped their pistols, evidently in expectation that the dandy sport would follow the veteran, but, as this did not occur, Dick Knowdell cried:

"Come take a drink, old man! It ain't you we're tryin' to 'round up,' though you did help that slick cuss to stampe us to-day."

"And he'll hev to foot the bill, too, when we git through with his boss!" growled Sandy McGill.

"They ain't no time like the present, laddy-buck," coolly retorted Old '49, hand on revolver, ready to draw and fire instantly. "Ef you've got any bill ag'inst me, present it, an' I'll pay ef it takes the last bullet I've got in two sixes! Don't hold back beca'se I'm a old man. I've got more fun in me than you hev had whisky—"

"Go slow, Sandy," and as he spoke sharply, Knowdell grasped the arm of his comrade. "Business afore pleasure. When we've got through with the work already on hand, then you kin settle with this gent. But ontel then—quiet, or ride me!"

Sandy McGill gave a sullen growl, but subsided, and Dick Knowdell renewed his invitation to the veteran.

"I'd rather fight then drink, but sence you won't let sonny, thar, chaw up the old man as he wanted, here's with ye. Hope it ain't no Arizony cocktail, though!"

The cowboys interchanged swift glances at this speech, and then turned so that they could face both Old '49 and the door. The reckless manner of the veteran troubled them, and surely he would not have dared rub their sore point by such a remark as his last unless he had solid backing?

To others besides the bullwhackers it looked as though the old man was trying to force a fight with the trio, though the odds would seem so terribly against him.

Old '49 drank, refused a second invitation and left the house.

As he reached the nearest shadow, he halted and glanced back, to see Dick Knowdell, peeping through the half-open door. Only for a moment longer, then the cowboy withdrew, and feeling tolerably certain that they would not resume their "promenade" at once, after his peculiar manner, for fear of being taken unawares by the dandy sport, he hastened back to the hotel, where he found Easy Elbert awaiting him.

"Well?" demanded the dandy sport. "You found them?"

"Yes, down at the Big Bonanzy, gittin' Dutch courage aboard."

"As you came through the office, did you notice whether there were many persons present?"

"A dozen or more. They know somethin' in the wind, I reckon. They was talkin' 'bout you an' them bull-thumpers."

"They know I am still in my room, no doubt. If we go down that way, they'll flock after, to see the sport. I'm not so very exclusive, but I don't care to have a full brass band telling those rascals I'm coming to hunt them up, since they decline to call on me here, as I invited them."

"Say the word, an' I'll 'gage to keep 'em from leavin' the room to foller ye," quickly uttered the old man.

Easy Elbert laughed pleasantly, and responded:

"Thanks: I have no doubt you could and would do so, but we can manage better than that. Besides, I will need you to find out whether my men are still in the saloon."

"You go out and wait for me. I will jump from the window, yonder—the ground is soft enough—"

"Better both go. I kin out-jump a jack-rabbit, old as I be."

"Just as you prefer. Perhaps it would be better. That way those fellows below cannot possibly suspect anything until they hear the band begin to play down the street. Ready?"

Old '49 nodded, and Easy Elbert blew out the light, opened the window and leaped out, closely followed by the veteran.

"Foller me," whispered the latter. "I'll go ahead, an' enter fust. Ef I don't come out ag'in afore you kin count twenty by your pulse, you may know the bull-thumpers is in thar too."

Easy Elbert found no fault with the programme, and paused directly opposite the Big Bonanza, while Old '49 crossed over and entered, finding the cowboys just as he had left them, keeping close watch over the entrance.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the veteran, passing along to the further end of the bar and thumping his fist upon it heavily to attract attention, "you know I sorter tuck the part of the dandy sport as calls hisself Easy Elbert, to-day, when the odds looked big ag'in't him, but I'm p'izen sorry for it now. Why? Beca'se I've got the best o' reasons fer thinkin' he's got skeered an' jumped the town—levanted!"

CHAPTER IX.

A COOL HAND.

OLD '49 had spoken on the impulse of the moment, caring little what he said so that it

proved startling and sensational enough to draw the cowboys off their guard for a moment or two. He had counted on finding them at the gaming-tables, beyond the partitioned off space appropriated to the bar, communication between the two rooms being had by means of a medium-sized archway, now closed by heavy woolen curtains, or else so nearly drunk from their frequent imbibitions as to be easily thrown off their guard. Instead, he found them alert and ready, never all turning from the entrance at the same time, keeping close together and fully prepared to act in concert the instant such a necessity arose. And the experienced veteran saw, too, that the odds were all in favor of the cowboys. At most, only two men could enter the saloon abreast, and this narrow space was all Dick Knowdell and his mates were obliged to cover. On the contrary Easy Elbert would have to pick his men out of a score and over, several of whom were dressed in a garb not unlike that worn by the cowboys. The keenest eyes could not do this instantaneously, and where men have been trained to handle and use fire-arms from earliest youth, a single instant is often all the difference between life and death.

No man knew this better than did Old '49, and with a swift regret that he had not bidden Easy Elbert wait a longer space, he rattled off the sentences which close the preceding chapter. The sensation desired was produced, though not in the entirety which Old '49 hoped rather than expected. Sandy McGill and Dave Farmer turned quickly toward the speaker, but after one swift glance, Dick Knowdell faced the entrance with revolver drawn, thumb on hammer and forefinger within the trigger-guard. He had a shrewd suspicion that the returned Californian was playing a part in the interests of the dandy sport, and was resolved not to be taken at a disadvantage again.

"Tell ye jest how it was," continued Old '49, wondering what was the reason Easy Elbert did not make his appearance, as the time mentioned had already expired. "I knowed the young chap's folks when he was a kid, an' tuck a interest in him to-day, all the more that he showed good pluck. Fer that same reason I went to the Occidental jest now, to tell him that these three gents was on the war path a-lookin' fer him—"

"What durn business was it o' yourn?" growled Sandy.

"I jest made it my business," coolly retorted the veteran. "Thought it was a p'izen shame you three fellers should be kep' jest sp'ilin' fer a fight, down here, while mebbe he was up thar, waitin' fer you to call on him 'cordin' to the invite he give ye this a'ternoon."

"They told me at the hotel office that Easy Elbert was in his room, so up I runs, only to find the room empty, the winder open out o' which the sport must 'a' jumped—"

If Old '49 ever concluded his sentence, no one save himself was aware of the fact, for at that instant one of the large windows was shattered, sending the broken glass in a jingling shower half-way across the room.

Instantly all eyes were turned in that direction, Knowdell raising his revolver, instinctively connecting the crash with his enemy—and correctly, too!

"Good-evening, gentlemen!" uttered a pleasant voice, and the dandy sport leaped lightly through the doorway, a cocked and leveled revolver in each hand. "Hold hard, all!" he added, sharp and sternly. "I'll kill the first man who tries to burn powder before I've had my say—and you first of all, Dick Knowdell!"

The surprise was complete. Of the three cowboys, only Knowdell had a weapon drawn, and he saw that his brain was covered—that before his aim could be shifted, a shot from that steady hand would send him "over the range."

There was a swift scattering of all save the three cowboys and Old '49. The former trio dare not move. For the second time they had been outwitted by Easy Elbert.

"I have you foul, gentlemen, just where you hoped to catch me," added the dandy sport, with a soft, mellow laugh.

"By another darn trick, for which that old cuss hes got to pay big!" growled Dick Knowdell, savagely.

"You're hardly in a safe condition to make threats as savage as that, my dear sir," coolly retorted Easy Elbert. "I chanced to hear my name spoken as I came up, and though knowing that listeners rarely hear any good of themselves, I thought I would not interrupt the gentleman. I am glad that I acted thus, since you seem to think that yonder old man and I are acting in concert. All that I heard of his speech was simple truth. I did leave my room at the Occidental by way of the window, for a very simple reason. You fellows spread word all over town that you intended to shoot me at sight, and as a matter of course a goodly number of sensation-lovers were anxious to see the sport. The hotel office was full of them, waiting for me to leave my room, and to avoid their spoiling my chance of getting the drop first, I chose to give them the slip—and did so."

While the dandy sport was talking, the bullwhackers watched closely for a chance to turn the tables on him, but in vain. Steadily those frowning muzzles covered them, and there was something in those bright blue eyes behind the weapons that warned them at least two lives would pay the forfeit of any rash move.

Easy Elbert was taking no extra risks just then, but was bent on carrying out a bold project which he had formed when word was first passed him that the mates of Jack Irish had sworn to send him over the range with his boots on.

When Old '49 entered the saloon, Easy Elbert waited the full period mentioned, then crossed over the street, feeling assured that his game was inside. As he reached the entrance, he heard the veteran speaking, and instantly divined his purpose. Peering through the narrow crack between the baize-covered screens which occupied the place of doors, he saw that Dick Knowdell alone of the trio was on guard, ready for a shot the instant his enemy should enter. Easy Elbert knew that he could kill the cowboy by a shot through the crack, but that savored too strongly of murder, and he chose a more risky expedient. With a heavy stone he struck the center of the window, where the sash crossed, then made his entry as detailed.

"You have publicly boasted that you meant to kill me on sight, and by all the laws of the border, I would be held justified in shooting you down now, without giving you a chance for your lives. But that is not my style. I maneuvered to get the drop on you three fellows, not for the purpose of assassination, but to insure your listening to a little business proposition which I am about to make you. At the same time I am not so foolishly humane as to suffer you to slip in a shot first, if I can pull trigger quick enough to stop you."

"Too darn much talk," growled Dick Knowdell. "Shoot ahead or give up your gun!"

"You'll take no further interest in the game after I fire my first shot, so don't crowd me too close," coolly retorted the dandy sport. "You fellows have sworn to send me over the range. May I ask why?"

"Cause you shot our mate, Jack Irish."

"After he fired at me—and even then I spared his life."

"Better 'a' tuck it clean. That wouldn't 'a' bin so bad. Now, you've left him a cripple fer life."

"He brought it on himself, and got no more than his ugly bullying deserved," was the stern reply. "I spared his life when he had forfeited it by every rule and law of the land we live in. I sent for a surgeon to attend him, and said that I would be responsible for all bills, and see that he lacked nothing that money could supply. And for this you have sworn to hunt me down to death!"

"Very well; so be it. But bear this in mind. If you are bound for a fight, all right, but I mean to shoot to kill if crowded any more. Your minds are fully made up?"

"We're men growed, not children," growled Knowdell.

"And you, gentlemen?" added Easy Elbert, nodding toward the other two, who seemed content that their mate should act as spokesman for them as well.

"Ef you don't kill us, we'll kill you," doggedly uttered Sandy McGill.

"Es fer me, I ride with the boys," grunted Dave Parmiter, by far the most phlegmatic of the trio.

For an instant there was breathless silence. The spectators expected to see the dandy sport open fire at once, and that such was the opinion of the cowboys was made apparent by their stiffening muscles and sternly set jaws. Though they knew that two of their number must almost certainly fall dead at the first shots fired by the dandy sport, not one of them flinched or showed the faintest signs of fear. Even their adversary was forced to admire their iron nerve, for he abruptly broke the oppressive pause by crying:

"By Jove!" this looks too much like murder! I'll give you an even chance for life, if you will accept it. What say?"

"We ain't dyin' to be rubbed out, ye may be sure," said Dick Knowdell, with a grim smile. "But we won't back water on that account. You're a pesky fool, though, ef you give up the grip you've got, unless it is to take a surer one!"

"Candid, if not complimentary," laughed Easy Elbert. "Listen. I can shoot you three fellows down before you could fire a shot in return, but I'd rather not do it unless I'm obliged to. Pledge me your word of honor that you will not fire a shot or strike a blow of any kind at my life before, and I will meet you all in a fair duel, you three against me alone, any time after to-morrow noon that may suit your convenience best."

"Ef you don't run away to night," growled Sandy McGill.

"That earns you the first shot I fire, either tonight or to-morrow, dog!" cried the dandy sport sharply, his blue eyes fairly flashing fire. "Another slur like that, and I swear I'll bore your brain with a bullet!"

"Hold your hush, Sandy," supplemented

Knowdell, favorably impressed by the words of the sport. "You ax our pledge, but you don't offer none yourself, stranger."

"If you agree, I swear by all that men hold holy, I will not follow up the advantage I now hold over you. I will meet you to-morrow, at three o'clock, on the level plain south of town, and there fight you three at the same time. Of you two men, I ask only a like pledge, but as for yonder cur, I would not trust him under oath—"

"I promise fer him—an' ef he goes crooked atween now an' then, Dave an' me'll set him straight or kill him," earnestly added Knowdell.

"Very well," and much to the cowboys' relief and Old '49's disgust, Easy Elbert lowered his revolvers. "Take your horses to the ground with you, for you will need them. I'll tell you the conditions of the duel when we meet, and then, if you are not satisfied with them, we'll each pick one man, they to select a third, and we four to fight after the fashion they declare. Is this satisfactory?"

"A hog couldn't ask fer no more, an' you're a heap whiter man than even I tuck yer fer!" exclaimed the cowboy.

"Don't let your admiration spoil your shooting to-morrow, for rest assured that I mean business," laughed the dandy sport. "Bar-keeper, set out your best. Gentlemen, join us!"

It is needless to say that the invitation was accepted, and the four men who were to meet in mortal strife on the morrow, drank each other's healths!

CHAPTER X.

OLD '49 AND HIS DOUBLE.

Of the five men who felt more than a passing interest in the affair, Old '49 was by long odds the least pleased when the truce was fairly made. In fact his disgust was so complete when Easy Elbert voluntarily relinquished the great advantage he had gained over the enemy, that he flatly refused to join them in drinking together, and left the Big Bonanza, feeling himself shamefully defrauded.

"The durned contrary cuss 'll fix it so one or t'other on 'em 'll be sure to rub him out," he growled, almost beside himself with disgust. "An' I b'lieve he done it jest to spite me! Ef he did—"

A man was hurrying along with swift, silent strides, when he stopped abruptly beside the old Californian and peered for a moment into his face, then muttered:

"Gene Fields? Was jest lookin' fer you 'mong others. Take this—work on hand tonight—read fust, then chaw up an' swaller—anyhow, don't leave it round loose!"

These words were uttered with extraordinary rapidity, and at the same time a small scrap of paper was thrust into the hand of Old '49; then, before he could have replied, even if he had deemed it advisable to do so, the man was gone.

"Durned ef I know the feller from a side o' sole-leather," grunted the veteran, staring into the shadows where the man had vanished. "Tuck me fer somebody else, I reckon. 'Gene Fields, he said, an' somethin' 'bout chaw up—swaller— By the Lord! I b'lieve that's it!" he exclaimed in an excited tone, hastening toward the nearest light, which chanced to be that shining through the window of the Big Bonanza, shattered by Easy Elbert.

Keen as the old man's eyes were, the light was insufficient to enable him to decipher the few words in writing which the paper he held contained, and hiding it in his palm, he entered the saloon.

The three cowboys were still there, but Easy Elbert had vanished. Feeling tolerably certain that he had not yet left the building, Old '49 passed on and pushing aside the curtains which filled the archway, he entered that portion devoted to gambling purposes.

Almost his first glance rested on Easy Elbert, who was seated alone at one of the small, round tables with which the further half of the apartment was furnished for the accommodation of such of the Big Bonanza's patrons as wearied of faro, or who preferred short cards.

Two faro lay-outs were running, though the attendance at each table was slender, the hour being rather early for the regular habitués.

Old '49 glided across the room to where Easy Elbert sat, reading a newspaper and smoking. The dandy sport frowned a little as he noticed the veteran, and spoke hastily, though in a guarded tone:

"It won't do you any particular good to be seen in private conversation with me, my friend, after what occurred in there," nodding toward the saloon. "I came precious nigh having to lie to clear your skirts—"

"I ain't givin' a cuss what anybody thinks," bluntly interrupted the veteran. "I want to borrow a bit o' your light to read a love-letter by—so!"

The crumpled scrap of paper contained only a few words:

"Work on hand. Be at the old rendezvous by two o'clock."

"Read that," and Old '49 placed the paper in

Easy Elbert's hand, a dark frown wrinkling his brows.

"Well?" and the dandy sport looked up inquiringly.

"What's your idea of it?"

"Mine?" echoed Easy Elbert, his eyebrows rising. "The meaning is all Greek to me. I never saw the hand-writing before, if that is what you mean. If the paper was handed to you you surely know what it means."

"I ain't sure, but I'm willin' to bet my old boots that I does know," slowly uttered Old '49, drawing a chair to the table and sitting down. "It means you. Either them bullwhackers, which you was crazy enough to let up on after takin' so much trouble to ketch 'em whar the wool's short, or somebody else on whose corns you've trod sence you come here, is 'tarmined to clean you out— You kin laugh," he added doggedly, as the dandy sport smiled incredulously. "You kin grin as much as you durn please, but I feel it in my bones that I've struck the right lead, an' I never knowed the sign to fail—"

"Except when you spotted me as Ethelbert Graindorge!"

"Drop that ef you please," said the old man, sternly. "You can't laugh me out o' that idee no more than you kin this one I've jest tuck up. Time 'll show which is right, you or me."

Speaking rapidly, Old '49 told how the paper came into his possession, together with the words spoken to him by the bearer. Easy Elbert listened intently, but could not see how the affair concerned him, and said as much, adding:

"Don't you think you are taking just a little too much interest in my personal safety? I don't want to be abrupt, but I'm not exactly a child in leading-strings, nor do I care to have such close watch kept over me as you seem to feel bound—"

"An' so I be bound. As I said afore, I've got a fust mortgage on your life, an' while I live they can't nobody put in a claim ahead o' mine. I b'lieve, afore God, that you air Ethelbert Graindorge, an' I don't mean to let you out o' my sight ontel I've settled that question one way or the other, dead sure! I'll guard your life with my own, ef anybody else tries to down ye, not beca'se I love you so powerfully, but beca'se I've sworn by all that's holy, kneelin' on the grave of a murdered man, to never leave the death-trail ontel the noose o' the hangman is fitted 'round the neck of the man that owned that name!"

"You have told me all this before, and I assure you that, while fully appreciating your motives, it does not interest me in the slightest degree. You will have your trouble for your pains, and, while shadowing me, may lose the actual criminal—but that is your lookout. Follow your own course, but don't make yourself too troublesome, or I may prove restive. Is this sufficiently plain?"

"Plain enough. You mean that you'll drop me by the roadside. By tryin' that you'll give yourself away, an' I ax nothin' better. Ef you're not the man I take you fer, you've got nothing to fear from me—"

"Look yonder—at that fellow just entering the room!" muttered Easy Elbert, in a more interested tone.

Old '49 obeyed, and saw a man almost the perfect image of himself, save that his shaggy beard was not quite so liberally sprinkled with white hairs. Otherwise, in form, size, height, features, dress and carriage, the resemblance was really extraordinary.

"Your double—so much like you that, had I met him alone, I would be ready to swear it was you!" added the dandy sport. "And that explains your receiving this bit of paper. Big odds that fellow's name is Eugene Fields, and that the messenger mistook you for him!"

The same thought occurred to Old '49, and almost instantly a bold project flashed athwart his brain. He took the bit of paper from Easy Elbert's hand and left the table, crossing over to where his double now stood, watching the game at one of the faro lay-outs.

Fortune seemed to favor his scheme, for several men from the other table turned to leave the room in a body, and as they passed by Old '49 thrust the paper into the hand of his double.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the hand close upon the note, while the fellow cast a hasty glance around him, no doubt looking for the man who had delivered the message.

Old '49 was busily watching the game, and was not suspected. As he intended should be the case, the man who so strongly resembled him, doubtless attributed the act to one of the porters who had just left the room.

Old '49 saw the fellow draw aside and read the message, then crumple up the paper and put it in his mouth, working his jaws vigorously. More firmly than ever was he resolved to find out what it all meant, and leaving the house, he halted in the deep shadow, keeping close watch on the door of the Big Bonanza.

His vigil was not a long one. In the course of a few minutes his double came out of the building and walked rapidly up the street, Old '49 following him as silently and surely as an Indian on the war-path.

The man for whom Old '49 had been so curi-

ously mistaken, clearly understood the meaning concealed in that brief message, for he never once hesitated or paused until nearly clear of the town, when he entered a rude shanty at the back of which stood a still ruder stable.

The self-elected spy stole as near as the cover would permit, then lay low to await the reappearance of his double. This did not occur until Old '49 began to fear he had been making a fool of himself by entering on a wild-goose chase.

"Ef the durn cuss don't show up purty soon, I'll hire a jackass an' kick my brains out—wall, I should say it *was* 'bout time!" he growled, as the man emerged from the shanty and moved back to the stable.

Another spell of waiting, nearly as long as the other, then the spy bit his lips until the blood stained his teeth, in the effort to smother the volley of curses that rose in his throat, for the man was leading a stout horse, saddled and bridled, all ready for the road.

"Ef that ain't a p'izen swindle, then I wouldn't say so!" he thought, hugging the ground closely as his double mounted the horse and rode toward the scanty cover under which he lay. "Four legs ag'in' two—but ef the moon-eyed cuss don't ride me down, I'll foller 'im long's my wind holds out!"

Close past the spy rode his double—so close in fact that but for the instinctive shying of the animal, Old '49 would have had to discover himself or else be trampled under foot. Luckily for all concerned, the rider did not suspect the real cause of his horse's shying, and rode on after an oath or two.

Nothing daunted by his narrow escape from discovery, Old '49 arose and stole after his double, though he now began to doubt the truth of his first suspicion.

"They wouldn't need hosses ef they was goin' to lay fer the dandy sport. Some road-agent business, most likely. I'm a durn fool fer botherin' my head about it at all, but when I sot out on a trail, it's monstrous hard to leave it afore I see both ends. Good Lord!"

Old '49 fairly leaped up into the air as he uttered this exclamation in a tone that would surely have reached the ears of his double had they not at that moment been passing over rocky ground where the iron-shod hoofs of the horse made considerable sound. Any one who had witnessed that leap, would have thought the veteran had stepped upon a rattlesnake, whose sharp fangs had promptly resented the outrage. Such was not the case, however, though Old '49 could not have been more violently shocked if a serpent instead of an idea had suddenly struck him.

"I *knowed* he was mixed up in it—I felt it in my bones, an' they've never fooled me yit!" he muttered, his voice husky, his eyes glowing like those of an enraged cat. "An' I, like a nat'ral born durn fool, showed him the paper, 'stead o' workin' it out on my own judgment. I mought 'a' trailed him down, an' ketched him like he ketched me last Chewsday was a week! 'Steard o' that I showed him my hand!"

There came an abrupt break in the soliloquy. Only by clapping both hands tightly over his mouth could Old '49 smother the fierce curse that rose in his throat.

He believed he saw the whole diabolical scheme now.

Easy Elbert was really Ethelbert Graindorge, as he from the first felt assured. He had entered into that armed truce with him that evening to only the more surely put him out of the way, by first throwing him in a measure off his guard.

"He sot that feller on to make what I thought was a mistake. He knowed I'd think it meant him, an' 'cordin' to our 'greement, I'd tell him all 'bout it. It was fer that that he let up on them bull-thumpers when he hed them foul, an' set to-morrow afternoon to meet 'em. Afore then he'll be many a mile away from here, ef he kin knock me over to-night! It was fer that that he p'inted out the critter that looked like me—got up on purpose, no doubt! An' I all the time thinkin' how pesky slick I was playin' it onto the greeny! While he was leading me straight into the trap!"

Old '49 paused, but it was only for a moment. His greatest failing was a bull dog obstinacy, and though he now firmly believed that a cunning snare had been set for him, he could not bring himself to beat a retreat.

"Ef it don't come one way, 'twill another. Fer two years I've bin huntin' fer Ethelbert Graindorge. Now I know he ain't fur ahead o' me, I won't drop off the trail 'cause thar's resk to run."

From that moment the spy did not hesitate, but with every sense on the alert, he dogged the horseman, keeping just within sight and hearing, his revolver drawn for instantaneous use should he be led into the ambush he more than half suspected was laid for him.

He was a little puzzled when his double at length drew rein and uttered a short, peculiar whistle, which was almost immediately answered from a clump of timber and bushes no great distance ahead. Then the man rode on and vanished from his view among the trees.

Old '49 glided swiftly to one side, where he

could see if the horseman rode on through the cover; but he waited for near five minutes without result. If his suspicions were correct, there had been a hitch somewhere in the plans of his enemy.

Growing uneasy, fearing that the man he had hunted for so long would in some manner again foil him, Old '49 resolved to steal closer to the clump of timber and solve the riddle that so perplexed him. He knew that such a course must be attended by great risk, but just now he was in no humor to think of prudence.

Flat on his face he silently crept up to the edge of the bushes that surrounded the timber, then paused in the dense shadows. He could now hear the low hum of human voices, and could even distinguish an occasional disconnected word. This but increased his eagerness, and inch by inch he worked his way through the undergrowth, carefully clearing all obstacles and avoiding, as by instinct, everything that could possibly betray his presence to the men beyond.

At length he paused, and plainly heard the voice of his double:

"Hope it won't be another a'fa'r like that job with the big rock last week. Too durn much work an' not 'nough pay!"

"We'll know when the boss comes. Hark! ain't that the sound of a horse's hoofs?"

Old '49 heard the same sound, and kept his pistol ready.

A moment later came a clear whistle, promptly answered from the grove, and then a horseman rode into the cover, at a point only a few yards from where Old '49 lay, but still hidden from his eager gaze.

"Well, my lads, you are all here?" uttered a clear, mellow voice that caused every nerve in the spy's body to quiver with a fierce, mad delight—for it was the voice of Easy Elbert!

"At last!" he grated, savagely, clutching his revolver.

CHAPTER XI.

WILD KATE TAKES A HAND.

OLD '49 and his double had not left the gambling-room of the Big Bonanza many minutes ere Easy Elbert, the dandy sport, underwent a curious experience.

He was really interested in the contents of the newspaper spread upon the table before him, when all at once, without sound or warning, that strange feeling thrilled him through every nerve and fiber; first a cold shiver, then a hot wave that tingled and burned like electricity.

Glancing up, his eyes were arrested by a graceful shape outlined against the dark green curtains with which the archway was filled. A human form, barely up to middle height of man, clad after a fashion more suitable to the time and place, but to the full as neat and handsome as was the stylish suit worn by the dandy sport. Knee-boots of morocco leather, armed at the heel with golden spurs. Trowsers of buckskin, a short-skirted tunic of the same material, Indian-tanned and smoked to a golden yellow, both fringed at the seams and profusely ornamented with beadwork and silk embroidery; a broad-leafed soft felt hat, pinned up on the left side by a golden dagger; about the round, trim waist, an embroidered belt supporting a knife and a brace of pearl-handled revolvers; upon the face, a black velvet mask reaching to the lower end of the nose, then so heavily fringed that both mouth and chin were hidden—the garb of a frontier dandy, if a man—but far less keen eyes than those of Easy Elbert could tell that this was a woman. Indeed there was little or no attempt to disguise this fact. The small, round waist, the swelling bust and hips were fitted closely by the soft buckskin, revealing soft curves and voluptuous outlines such as no mortal man could ever boast.

At a single glance Easy Elbert took all this in, and his face flushed hotly for a moment, then faded away until his features were white as marble. He caught his breath once with a sudden, painful gasp, then all traces of emotion, vanished and his eyes returned to his paper.

But the printed words might have been a perfect blank, for aught he saw just then. He felt that this woman in male attire had singled him out—was slowly approaching him, heedless of the many eyes which were turned curiously upon her, though no man made further move or ventured to accost her.

This was not the first time that "Wild Kate" had visited the gambling-room of the Big Bonanza in that disguise, and its *habitués* had learned to give her free passage, for with the garb, she had assumed the other rights of man in the fullest sense of the word. Twice she had promptly avenged a drunken insult, and then it was publicly proclaimed, by a number of prominent sports who seemed to consider her occasional visits to their halls of fortune as a personal compliment, that each and every man who gave Wild Kate cause for complaint would be sent "over the range" by the quickest and most direct route.

White and seemingly calm as a marble statue Easy Elbert sat while he felt that Wild Kate

was approaching him, his heart throbbing so violently that it seemed to him as though every person in the room must hear it. Then a white hand was placed upon his paper, and a clear, cold voice uttered:

"You seem to be deeply interested in the news—"

"I was, but that is no longer the case," and the dandy sport rose to his feet and doffed his cap with a low bow. "If I can serve you in any way, lady, pray command me."

A low laugh, mellow and musical as the tone of a silver bell, but with more of mockery than of mirth, greeted Easy Elbert's polite speech.

"Is not that a rather rash speech, my dear sir?"

"Under some circumstances it might be, not now. At all events, it was perfectly sincere. Put me to the test, and satisfy yourself."

"Perhaps I may before all is over," was the significant response—in tones rather than words. "My excuse for interrupting your reading is easily given. This is a hall of fortune, and those who attend are supposed to have no deep-seated scruples against cards. You play?"

"Occasionally. If you wish a game or two, I am entirely at your service—though it is no more than fair to warn you that I always play to win—and seldom fail."

The words were uttered quietly enough, but there was a meaning in his tone as his eyes met her's fully, that caused the black orbs to flash vividly as their owner turned her head and called out:

"Will some gentleman kindly furnish me with a fresh deck of cards?"

Half of the number in the room hastened forward, each eager to supply the want, and happy was the man whose fingers touched hers for an instant as the cards were taken.

"Thanks—to each one of you, gentlemen," said Wild Kate, bowing. "I don't wish to seem rude, but this gentleman and I have agreed to play a game or two of 'draw' for rather heavy stakes, and I always lose nerve whenever my play is being overlooked."

The pointed hint was sufficient, and somewhat abashed the disappointed crowd fell back.

Easy Elbert smiled slightly as he said:

"You rule right royally, lady, but judging from the sour looks those poor devils cast upon me the position of court favorite is not wholly a bed of roses!"

"You are afraid—"

"Not of them. A few ill-wishers more or less will not destroy my appetite," the dandy sport laughed carelessly as he placed a chair for Wild Kate.

The wrapper was torn open, the cards shuffled, cut and dealt, Wild Kate putting up a gold coin as ante. Each discarded and drew, then made slight wagers, but any one watching the game would quickly have seen that the cards served only as a convenient cover for something of far greater importance. Through pure force of habit each played their hands for all they were worth, first one winning, then the other, Easy Elbert, now cool and keen-witted as ever, patiently waiting the pleasure of his adversary.

"You play well," at length observed the woman.

"Naturally, since it is my profession—the only one I ever took any diploma in," was the quiet response.

"You forget the time when you were an overland trader—or was that one of the arts you failed in?"

Easy Elbert met her burning gaze with a look of innocent surprise, then made reply:

"I'm afraid I misunderstood you, madam."

"Four years ago this summer, you were running two wagons along the Smoky Hill route, in Kansas, trading in the small settlements and at ranches. Dare you deny this?"

"Since you, a lady, make the assertion, it must be true. If a gentleman had put the question, my answer would have been a flat denial," calmly uttered the dandy sport.

"And lied in making the denial! Bah! do you think to deceive me? Do you think I have forgotten—that I can ever forget all I have suffered through your diabolical wickedness?"

"Those are hard words for a lady to speak—"

"Are they too hard for the dastardly crime that you committed?" fiercely demanded Wild Kate, leaning across the little table, her eyes glowing through the mask-holes like living coals, yet speaking low enough not to attract the notice of the players behind her.

"Speak out plainly. Tell me just what crime I have committed, how I have deserved your hatred, and then I will know how to answer you. As it is, I am completely in the dark."

A low, intensely bitter laugh broke from Wild Kate.

"Perhaps you will also deny that you ever met me before?"

"No; we have met on two different occasions before this night. Once in St. Louis, and again this afternoon when you rode through town, and I was standing on the street. Besides these occasions, I saw you some hours later riding from town toward your home in the hills."

"I recognized you from my sister's descrip-

tion. You rendered her an important service, and I thank you for it—"

"It was a pleasure to me—"

"Silence!" sharply cried the masked woman. "In thanking you I have discharged my portion of that debt, though speaking such words to you almost blisters my lips!"

Easy Elbert smiled faintly as he shuffled the cards again.

"The remedy is easily applied, one would think. The world is wide enough. If we had never met each other again, you could have avoided the task you find so bitter. Remember it was you who sought this interview, not me."

"No doubt you would gladly have avoided both it and me," quickly retorted Wild Kate, "but, wide as you say this world is, it is not wide enough for you to hide from the stern consequences of your cowardly crime, Ethelbert Graindorge!"

The faint smile grew strong enough to raise the pointed mustaches and arch the dandy sport's eyebrows, while there was a look of amused wonder in his bright blue eyes.

"You are the second person to call me by that name since sunset, lady," he said, softly. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but as the gentleman whose name you mention—"

"Dare you deny that you are Ethelbert Graindorge?" asked—almost hissed—Wild Kate, her eyes blazing more fiercely than ever.

As she grew heated Easy Elbert seemed to grow more cool, and his face was the very picture of good-natured innocence as he said:

"Am I to answer you, lady, or your garb?"

"Tell the truth, unless you are afraid it will choke you!"

"You are complimentary—never mind. It is a sacred rule of mine to never contradict a lady, right or wrong; but as you ask that question seriously, I will answer it as I would if you were of the sex the garb you wear represents. I am not Ethelbert Graindorge—"

"A lie!" hoarsely gasped the woman; "a lie false as your own crime-stained soul! You are Ethelbert Graindorge!"

"And you—are a woman," was the quiet response to this passionate outburst.

"Bah! that subterfuge shall not avail you. I am man enough to prove my words and make them good. I will strip that cunning mask of assumed innocence from your face, and reveal you to the whole world for the vile, cowardly, treacherous reptile I know you. You are Ethelbert Graindorge!"

She paused, her breath exhausted by fierce passion. Her bosom rose and fell rapidly, her superb form quivered with powerful emotions. Yet through it all she had remembered where they were, and never raised her voice high enough or made a gesture sufficient to attract the attention of the men gathered around the faro-tables that occupied the same room.

Whatever may have been his emotions, Easy Elbert, who sat facing the gamblers, maintained perfect control of his features, going through the motions of dealing or playing whenever any of the men beyond glanced in that direction. He, too, spoke low and guardedly, like one who had no desire to spread abroad the cause of this strange interview.

"Let it be so, then, since you insist, madam," he said, in a tone of perfect indifference. "No matter what his sins, they can scarcely be heavier than those which may rightfully be charged against me. Call me Ethelbert Graindorge, then, and let it go at that."

"Will you swear—bah!" and Wild Kate interrupted herself with a short, contemptuous laugh. "I am growing as foolish and simple as you are keen-witted! What is one lie more—what is a broken oath to a murderer?"

"So!" exclaimed Easy Elbert, in a tone of satisfaction. "We are progressing a little, after all. I am an assassin, then, it appears. Since you insist on my taking the character, pray enlighten me a little further. Whom did I murder? When? Where? And what was the object I hoped to obtain thereby?"

The dandy sport had pressed his cool assurance too far. Wild Kate was driven fairly beside herself, and Easy Elbert, in all his checked career, never stood nearer to death's door than he did at that moment.

"Are you flesh and blood, or a veritable fiend?"

Harsh and barely articulate came the words, and her hand sunk below the table, but still the dandy sport either failed to realize or laughed at his peril.

"I am simply Ethelbert Graindorge, lady; your very humble servant to command," he replied, laughing softly, his bright blue eyes looking, as she believed, mockingly into hers.

"Then die! liar—traitor—assassin!"

As the words came grating between her tightly-clinched teeth, Wild Kate raised her hand and thrust a cocked revolver full against the left breast of Easy Elbert, who never flinched, never ceased smiling, as she pulled the trigger and the hammer fell!

CHAPTER XII.

A KISS FOR A BLOW.

THERE was barely one chance in a thousand of his escaping death, and Easy Elbert was

fully aware of the terrible odds against him as the maddened woman pressed the muzzle of her revolver directly over his heart, yet he never flinched a hair's breadth or made the least attempt to avert his doom. A smile was upon his lips, a strange light in his magnetic blue eyes that still further enraged Wild Kate. She thought he was laughing at her; that he believed she, a woman, would not dare fire upon him, and scarcely realizing what she was doing, she pulled the trigger.

The weapon was one of the best that money could purchase, 32-caliber, using metallic cartridges, central fire, and the records show that scarcely one shell out of a thousand as they come from the factory misses fire. Long odds, but Easy Elbert won! A dull click instead of an explosion!

Wild Kate seemed dazed. A low cry escaped her lips. Was this man indeed under Satan's guardianship that he invariably escaped her vengeance? Like one in a dream she heard the low, soft voice of the dandy sport:

"You are unlucky, my dear madam, in your choice of tools. Once before to-night your weapon failed you. Possibly the old saying may prove true in your case. Try again, and see if the third time really is the charm."

A slap in the face would have been far easier to bear than this cool speech—insolent mockery it seemed to her—and the bloody mist was swept away from her vision. She saw that smiling face—handsome as Lucifer before the fall. There was a light in his eyes that seemed to fill her veins with ice. A sharp, painful cry broke from her lips, then her weapon was once more cocked and pressed against that dauntless breast.

"Be quick!" said Easy Elbert, speaking low and rapidly. "Be quick, as you may be interrupted. Your voice and actions have attracted notice. Shoot; tell them that I insulted you, and they will praise instead of blaming you."

If he had shown the least symptom of fear, if there had been the slightest trace of mockery in his tones, or aught else beside an earnest desire to give her an excuse which would avert from herself the consequences due the insane act which she contemplated, the fatal touch would have been given, and Easy Elbert would have surely perished. As it was, the woman's nerve failed her, and the pistol was lowered, undischarged.

The smile on the dandy sport's face deepened, and a softer light came into his lustrous eyes. Had he calculated on just such a sequel to his bold, earnest speech?

At all events he had spoken truly when he said that Wild Kate's last cry had attracted attention, whether her action with the pistol had been noted or not. Half a dozen of the gamblers were approaching, half of them with drawn weapons, all with excited expressions and threatening scowls for Easy Elbert. At their head was one whom he readily recognized. Hugh Hardaway, and it was that worthy who spoke first as Wild Kate turned her head.

"Has this fellow dared to insult or cheat you, Miss Wilder?" he began, only to be checked by the fair gambler.

"If he had, I would not ask help to punish him—least of all yours, Hard Hugh!" she exclaimed, pushing aside her chair and rising, her right arm rising to a level, revolver in hand.

The burly speculator visibly shrunk back, raising his empty hand in protest, stammering:

"I thought—we heard you exclaim—"

"Silence! another word, and I'll save the hangman a disagreeable job!" cried the beautiful spitfire, her eyes glowing with hot indignation. "You have not my gentle sister to deal with now. Stop!" she added, as Hugh Hardaway fell back, covered with confusion. "Stand where you are for a moment. Gentlemen, I owe you an explanation, and you shall have it."

"You know this person as Hard Hugh—I know him as a base, cowardly woman-insulter! For weeks and months he has been persecuting my sister, whom the most of you know, by sight and name, at least. She repulsed his proposals, as firmly and decidedly as her gentle nature would allow—enough for any one with even the faintest spark of manhood about him to understand and respect—but yonder cringing cur still pressed his loathsome suit, and to-day, by playing the spy, contrived to catch my sister far from home, alone in the hills. Once more she rejected him—and he had the brutal baseness to threaten her, and even attempt force—when this gentleman interfered and gave him a most thorough ducking. He deserved far worse—and I now publicly declare that on a repetition of his offense, I will shoot him down without mercy!"

Swiftly she spoke, all the time keeping Hard Hugh covered by her weapon. He stood abashed before her, but there was an ugly, threatening light in his Indian-like eyes as he glared at the gamblers around him, that kept them from giving full utterance to the detestation which they really felt.

"You're a woman, and of course I can make no reply," he said, with a sickly smile. "But I am no woman," quietly said Easy Elbert, still shuffling the cards, "and perhaps you can answer me. I can swear to the truth

of the charges brought against you by this lady, and if she will kindly permit me—"

"I ask the assistance of no man—least of all, yours," Wild Kate interrupted, her voice hard and cold. "You have your warning, Hard Hugh. Now leave! If I see your ugly face here one minute longer, I will shoot you like a dog!"

"To save you that trouble, I will take my departure, the more readily that I have an important rendezvous to keep," carelessly uttered the speculator, showing his white teeth in a cruel smile. "But first—if there is any gentleman present who cares for further information on this very interesting subject, I can very easily be found, night or day!"

"And I say that no gentleman will take up this quarrel unless he wishes to incur my undying enmity," sharply cried Wild Kate. "Now you have made your speech—go!"

There was deadly peril in her burning glance, and Hard Hugh did not care to brave it any longer, but turned on his heel and left the room.

The other men fell back, and Wild Kate, putting up her pistol, resumed her seat and began dealing the cards. Easy Elbert quietly fell in with her humor, but he could see that the little breeze had roused the curiosity of nearly every body in the room, and frequent glances were cast in their direction. Not only this, but a number of the gamblers deserted the faro tables, forming short-card parties at the small tables, though a keen observer could see that they were more interested in their neighbors' than their own game.

"These good fellows evidently believe you are in bad or dangerous company, Miss Wilder," the dandy sport at length said, in a soft tone that could only reach the ears of his fair antagonist. "If I might venture to make a suggestion—"

Wild Kate bent her head slightly as Easy Elbert paused with a deferential air. As yet she dare not trust her voice. She felt that she would rather die than exhibit signs of weakness before this man, and strong, self-reliant as was her spirit, it had been severely shaken by the storm of passion.

"Thanks. As I said, we are closely watched now. If you have anything more to say to me, or wish to try another cartridge, there is room enough out doors—"

"Where you can give me the slip as you did once before?" interjected Wild Kate, her voice sounding almost harsh and unpleasant from the bitter insult with which it was fraught.

But Easy Elbert seemed to wear an armor that was proof against anything she could say. If it had vulnerable points, thus far Wild Kate had been unable to discover them. Once more his brows were elevated after that peculiar fashion, and there was a gentle surprise in the tones with which he asked:

"Did Ethelbert Graindorge number cowardice among his other faults, lady? If so, I am tempted to renounce the name and return to that of Easy Elbert."

"No—you are no coward—possibly because you have no heart to tell you the meaning of fear," slowly uttered Wild Kate, each word coming with a difficulty that showed how hard she found it to utter even this negative sort of praise in favor of the man she so intensely hated. "You did not flinch when I had your heart covered—I could feel it throbbing firm and regular as a machine. No, you have not the additional sin of physical cowardice to answer for, and—though I feel how foolish I am in even dreaming of such a thing!—if you will pledge me your word not to attempt to escape from me, I will accept your proposition."

"The word—the honor of an assassin?" echoed Easy Elbert, with a low, amused laugh. "You are indeed running a tremendous risk!"

"That is my look-out," was the sharp retort.

"Will you give the pledge—yes or no?"

"Yes. I promise to make no effort to escape from you, nor to thwart your purposes any more than I did when your weapon counted the pulses of my heart."

"I could place greater trust in you, if the pledge came less glibly from your tongue," a little maliciously commented Wild Kate. "After all, I would a little rather you did break your parole, for then I would need no further excuse for putting an end to the trail I have followed for so long—the best years of my life they would have been, but for you!"

For the first time since the strange interview began, the true woman revealed herself in these last words—so hopeless, so despairing, so full of pathos as uttered by Wild Kate, her proud head for the first time bowing.

And Easy Elbert turned pale as death as he saw two bright drops fall from beneath the velvet mask and strike upon the edge of the table. But as swiftly Wild Kate obliterated the tell-tale moisture with one dash of her hand, and her laugh was hard, cold and scornful once more.

"After all, I am but a woman, and all women are weak fools. I accept your pledge, because I have still more to say ere I bid you a final adieu."

"And of course you wish those adieux to be

confined strictly to ourselves," said Easy Elbert, unmoved by the peculiar significance with which her last words were uttered. "But that will hardly be possible, unless you condescend to unbend a trifle. These gentlemen have their curiosity thoroughly aroused, and are watching us closely. Unless you wish them to follow us, they must be blinded by a pretense of friendliness on our part. If you will consent to take my arm—"

"Anything—only to get out to the fresh air. I feel as though I was suffocating here!"

Easy Elbert instantly arose and in a matter-of-fact way, proffered his arm. Wild Kate accepted it, and then, to all appearance the best of friends, the couple left the room and the Big Bonanza behind them.

Once outside, Wild Kate dropped his arm, and walked rapidly up the street, past the Occidental hotel and so on until they were fairly clear of the town. Easy Elbert kept close to her side, cool and imperturbable as ever, though he honestly believed he was walking to his death. And when Wild Kate paused abruptly, turning upon him, his voice was calm and passionless as he spoke:

"Now you can finish your work, lady, without fear of interference. I only ask one favor—strike swift and sure."

A sharp cry of anger escaped the woman.

"Why are you so terribly like him? why do you look at me with his eyes, his beautiful face? Why do you speak to me in his voice, like an innocent martyr instead of the cruel, remorseless assassin I know you to be? Why do you not resist—try to escape—to kill me—anything but this mock resignation and assumed meekness! Struggle—fight against the just retribution that has at last overtaken you! Then I could forget the resemblance—I could deal the blow I swore you should feel, long years ago!"

"Do you insist on an answer?" asked Easy Elbert, his voice clear, but more musical than ever. "Shall I answer you as frankly as you have spoken?"

The woman nodded, afraid to trust her voice, for that wild, passionate outburst had left her weak and trembling. One brief glance she took at the face of her companion, then hastily averted her eyes.

The silvery moonlight fell full upon the features of Easy Elbert. Remarkably handsome under any circumstances, they seemed fairly glorified now. A painful, gasping sob broke from her lips as her eyes closed to shut out another face strangely like this—a face that she had last looked upon in life under just such another moonlight.

With an involuntary motion Easy Elbert stepped closer to her, an ardent light in his blue eyes, his arms extended as though he would clasp her trembling form closer to his breast—but only for a moment. Then he clasped his hands tightly behind his back, the more surely to resist that powerful temptation assailing him.

"As Heaven is my judge, lady, I will tell you the truth. I act thus because I would rather receive death from *your* hand than life from that of any other being upon earth!"

Deep and earnest were his tones now. If he was playing a part, then a more consummate actor never trod the boards!

Stung sharply by his words, Wild Kate turned upon him, her eyes flashing vividly, all traces of weakness vanishing as by magic, her voice ringing out imperiously:

"What do you mean by that speech?" she demanded.

"That I love you—that I have loved—nay, *worshiped* you ever since that night when we first met—"

A cry of almost frantic rage from the woman broke in upon his earnest speech, and her right hand smote him sharply on the lips. Swift as thought was the blow—swifter still was his retaliation. Before the hand could fall, it was caught and pressed once more to his lips.

"A kiss for a blow, lady!" he laughed, once more the gay dare-devil.

CHAPTER XIII.

ETHELBERT GRAINDORGE'S CRIME.

FOR a brief space Wild Kate seemed stupefied by this audacious action, then, instead of the outburst of passionate anger which the dandy sport fully expected, came a hard, cold laugh, followed by the words:

"Bah! what matter? It is only one more count against you, Ethelbert Graindorge, to be wiped out with all the rest!"

"And the others—may I ask what *they* are?"

"You dare ask that question? And of me?" she panted.

"If you really knew me as well as you think, lady, you would also be aware that I dare almost anything," was the cool response. "As Elbert Gray, whom I firmly believed myself to be, until you assured me of my mistake, my memory was remarkably good and retentive. There was not a single important event in my—I beg pardon—in *his* past life which he could not recall with perfect distinctness. But all

that is changed, now. As Ethelbert Graindorge, my memory of the past is painfully deficient. A sign of my total depravity, no doubt, but nevertheless, since you have condemned me to death for some terrible crime against you or yours, surely I have a right to ask a repetition of the evidence against me, if only that I may properly repent of my sins before you send me 'over the range.'"

Wild Kate gazed fixedly at the handsome, smiling dare-devil. Could it be possible that the earth in all its breadth had contained *three* faces of that peculiar, striking type of manly beauty? Could it be possible that she was mistaken—that this man was innocent—was not the blood-stained criminal she had taken him for?

Only for a fleeting instant did she entertain the doubt. Every line of that marvelously handsome face was as well known to her as her own, through the face of another whom she had loved with a love few women are enabled to feel—a face that years ago was food for worms, all through its remarkable resemblance to *this* face—the face of his brutal assassin!

Cunningly as the farce was played, she was not to be deceived—and she swore that it should end in a tragedy.

"So be it, then!" she exclaimed, her voice hard and reckless. "A repetition of the bitter wrongs I have received at your hands will help me to forget whose face it is you wear as a mask. Come—we may be spied upon, and I do not care to let the whole world into my secret, until I can point to the reparation made and the just vengeance executed," she said, turning and walking slowly along the road.

Quietly Easy Elbert kept pace with her, as he said:

"Are you not placing a dangerous degree of confidence in one whom you declare is a brutal assassin? You say in plain words that you mean to kill me, as a just retribution for my sins against you, yet I am well armed, and you walk beside me, wholly at my mercy if I chose to set myself free by violence."

"Lived there ever a woman who was wise?" came the bitter response. "Life is not so sweet that one need cling to it so tenaciously. My skirts are not wholly clear of blame for that black tragedy, and more than once I have prayed Heaven to strike me dead, and thus end the wretched struggle. With my own hand I would have solved the mystery that enshrouds death, only for my superstition. I had sworn to hunt you down, and I dared not thus break my oath. But if you were to turn upon me, as you hint, I could almost forgive you the terrible past. With your death or mine, I am absolved of my oath. Twice I have struck at your life, and each time it seemed as though I was dealing a blow at the dead man whose face you wear, yet, if I live, I must make the third attempt! Oh! if there is one solitary spark of manhood—of mercy—left in your heart, kill me and forever end this wretched strife!"

Passionately she turned upon him, her arms extended, her breast thrown forward to receive the death for which she begged as the highest boon which could be granted her.

For the first time since that strange interview began, Easy Elbert gave visible signs of being unmanned. He shrunk back, one hand pressed over his eyes, the other extended with an imploring gesture, and his voice was husky with emotion as he tremblingly cried:

"No, no—not that! I could no more raise my hand against you with evil intent, than I could plunge a knife into the heart of my sainted mother!"

For the space of a minute, neither spoke. Then Wild Kate broke the oppressive silence with a hard, reckless laugh that caused Easy Elbert to uncover his eyes, with a haunting fear that strong emotion had driven the woman mad.

Apparently Wild Kate divined his thoughts, for with another laugh, she spoke, her voice filled with a contemptuous mockery, without the faintest trace of her former agony.

"Did you think you alone knew how to play a part so cunningly as to make it appear even more natural than nature itself? Now we are quits on that score. You came very near convincing me that the evidence of all my senses had misled me—I returned the compliment, and you believed sorrow had suddenly driven me mad!"

"Truly, it was a marvelous piece of acting—if acting it actually was," quietly replied Easy Elbert, his own strong emotions vanishing to the full as swiftly.

"You doubt the truth of what I say?" exclaimed the woman.

"On the contrary, I am past doubting anything, since you convinced me that I was wrong in doubting my identity with Ethelbert Graindorge. Were you to declare that yonder moon is the sun—that it is broad daylight instead of night—that you are the devil and I an angel of light—I would humbly bow to your superior knowledge, and firmly believe it all true."

He was laughing at her, as Wild Kate felt, but if he hoped to throw her off her guard again, he should realize his mistake.

"I fear there is but very little of the angel about either of us," she said, with another reckless laugh. "But we have drifted away from our subject. I promised to raise the veil from the past of Ethelbert Graindorge, and I am now just in the mood for the task."

"And I assure you in advance of my closest attention," the dandy sport declared, with an easy laugh. "I am really curious to learn what I have done to earn the bitter hatred of—"

"Beware!" cried Wild Kate, sternly. "Guard your tongue, sir!"

Easy Elbert bowed low, and said no more.

"Of the earlier life of Ethelbert Graindorge—for the sake of being impersonal, we will try to forge, that *you* are the hero of this brief history—I know little and care less," began Wild Kate, speaking rapidly, as though fearful of her powers did she suffer her memory to dwell. "That it was wild and lawless, vile and depraved, may readily be inferred from the cunning fraud and brutal disregard for life for which his after-career became notorious, but we need only go back to a period four years ago."

"At that date, Ethelbert Graindorge was widely known along the Missouri river towns—Omaha, St. Joseph, Kansas City and St. Louis. He was a professional gambler, noted for his love of dress, high play and utter recklessness of law and order when on one of his periodical 'high-drinks' as the newspapers termed them. No man in private life was more frequently spoken of, thanks to the frequency with which his doings were paraded by the sensational papers, and through them a good portion of the world was made acquainted with the startling fact that Ethelbert Graindorge was a gambler no more—that he had been converted, joined the church, been baptized, and had discarded the pasteboards to take up the Bible. I remember reading all about it at the time, though I did not dream how terribly that widely heralded conversion was to affect me."

"Nearly every week the papers found something to say about the 'converted gambler'—how he made an eloquent address from this pulpit or that, pleading with scalding tears in his beautiful eyes that his late comrades in sin and iniquity might be led to realize the errors of their ways, and—bah! It was all the purest hypocrisy, as after events proved, and it turns me sick to dwell upon it!" the woman exclaimed, with a shudder of loathing.

Easy Elbert stood silent beneath the moonlight, his face calm but grave. One glance at him, then Wild Kate went on:

"Not long after his conversion Ethelbert Graindorge married—the papers as usual making haste to blazon the fact from one end of the world to the other. There were also paragraphs floating the rounds which stated that the gambler missionary was being slowly but surely broken down in health by his never-ceasing labors in the glorious cause—that unless he listened to the wise counsels of his best friends, and sought the vacation he so much needed, he would fall and die in harness."

"There was one other paragraph which I read and remembered when the terrible discovery burst upon me. It stated that Ethelbert Graindorge, having little fortune of his own, was yet resolved to make amends for the evil life he had led, by his death. In other words, he had insured his life for large sums, all of which was to be devoted to the cause of charity when he died—all save a modest income for his widow. And—it seems hardly credible now that we can see behind the scenes—lest he should forfeit his policies through inability to keep them up, several of the newspapers opened subscription lists for his benefit! No doubt thousands responded as I did—God help me!"

"At last the gambler-missionary—Christian martyr as some of the papers termed him—yielded to the prayers of his friends, and consented to seek repose from his wearing struggle against sin, but it was none of the beaten tracks for pleasure-seekers that he chose—he preferred communion with undefiled nature—in other words, he combined business with relaxation, and fitted up two wagons for the prairie trade."

"No one knew exactly from what point he was to start. For once Ethelbert Graindorge preferred to keep out of the newspapers. All that was known for certain was that he had entered Kansas, with two mule teams, loaded with notions."

"Then came occasional startling rumors. It was said that the gambler-missionary had been recognized by several who had seen him during his revivals—and that among other things contained by his wagons, whisky and cards were not lacking. One correspondent stoutly declared that he had heard the pious man 'curse a blue streak' one day when his mule-team got mired, and that he was then more than half-seas over!"

"Of course this was all set down to malice and envy, but it was published, because the public was hungry for anything that even remotely concerned Ethelbert Graindorge."

"Then, like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky, came the brief announcement that Ethelbert Graindorge was dead—had been killed by the accidental discharge of his own gun!"

Wild Kate paused, powerfully agitated, either by the recital or some circumstance closely connected with it. After a few moments' waiting, Easy Elbert broke the silence.

"Yet I am alive—and you declare that I am this man."

A hard, bitter laugh greeted the speech. Easy Elbert smiled quietly, for he had spoken only to arouse the woman from the painful weakness which was racking her, body and brain.

"Christened anew in the heart's blood of one who never did harm to you—no longer Ethelbert Graindorge, but Elbert Gray!" she cried, mockingly.

"There was a man killed, then?" quietly asked the dandy sport.

"Yes. Since you insist on hearing the whole story, listen and do not interrupt me."

"Ethelbert Graindorge had a driver for his second team—his partner, as it afterward proved—whose name was Henry Crickmore. He it was who rode forty odd miles in the night to a telegraph station on the Kansas Pacific, and wired the startling news to the St. Joseph papers, then returned and buried his dead employer. But he was not acting blindly. While riding to the railroad station, he stopped at a ranch, and telling his story, begged the men to make all haste to the scene of the tragedy, and remain there until he returned. And when he came back, the sheriff of the county was with him."

"His story was plain and straightforward. They had gone into camp for the night. A wolf came prowling around, and his mate, in hurriedly pulling his rifle out of the wagon, struck the hammer against the seat, discharging its contents straight through his heart, falling back and expiring without a word or groan."

"His account was believed—why should it not receive credence? No murderer would have acted as he had acted. A grave was dug, and the dead man was buried, after a minute description of his form, face and personal property was taken down in writing and signed by all present."

"You see your partner—I mean Henry Crickmore—was very careful that there should be no cause for doubt—too careful for one who played such a prominent part in the tragedy, as it proved, for that very precaution aroused suspicion that otherwise might have slept forever."

"I needed something just then to occupy my mind, and took an almost feverish interest in the case as reported in the papers from day to day, though I little suspected at that time how very nearly it concerned me."

"His wife lived in St. Joseph, and lost no time in having his will produced and read. In it Ethelbert Graindorge bequeathed everything to her, without reserve, insurance money and all—not one word was said about the charitable institutions he was to endow or benefit. And then there began to be whispered ugly stories of fraud—principally among those who had subscribed to the funds opened for the gambler missionary. And one day the papers announced that the various companies in which the life of Ethelbert Graindorge had been insured had held a consultation and decided to withhold payment until they were better satisfied as to the honesty of the case."

"Their suspicions were first awakened by the unusual care which Henry Crickmore had displayed in securing the evidence of the men he summoned to view the body. Then it was found that he claimed to be the brother of Ethelbert Graindorge's wife."

"Their first move was to send detectives out to the scene of the tragedy. These men found the lonely grave, questioned those who had assisted to bury the corpse, then opened the grave and prepared the remains for removal, satisfied that Ethelbert Graindorge had indeed been killed, whether accidentally and by his own hand, or foully murdered by Crickmore, they could not say."

"Only for an accidental discovery of one of the insurance officers, the black truth would never have been revealed on earth. He saw that the teeth of the corpse were double all the way round. A slight clew, it seemed, but there was an enormous sum of money at stake, and as their only hope of avoiding payment, the allies followed that clew to an end, in secret."

"By persistent search they found a dentist in St. Joseph who had attended Ethelbert Graindorge professionally, and who declared that the gambler's teeth were like the vast majority of people—single in front. He made affidavit to this fact, and the insurance men swore out a warrant against Henry Crickmore for murder."

"The wretch was terribly frightened, and when they told him that Ethelbert Graindorge had been arrested, and had made a full confession, swearing that he, Crickmore, had fired the fatal shot, he weakened and revealed the diabolical conspiracy in all its details."

"The dead man was David Arbuckle—and you—you murdered him!" cried Wild Kate, her long pent up passion bursting forth.

But Easy Elbert faced her as calmly as ever, and asked:

"And this David Arbuckle was—"

"My husband!"

CHAPTER XIV.

INNOCENT OR GUILTY?

THE words were uttered with more of fierceness than of grief—at least so fancied the dandy sport, and that peculiar smile crept into his face once more. Wild Kate saw this, and clinched her hands so tightly that the slender fingers were tipped with blood. For the second time during that interview, the life of Easy Elbert hung upon a thread so slender that the faintest breath might have broken it. He knew this—knew that the half-crazed woman was terribly tempted to again strike at his life, yet he seemed to court the blow, rather than otherwise.

"Really, I had not the faintest idea that I was such a frightfully interesting creature! Pray, continue your narrative, Miss—I beg pardon!—Mrs. Arbuckle. You can have no idea how much interest I feel in learning the rest."

Wild Kate's eyes flashed like fire, but those innocent-appearing blue orbs never flinched from her gaze. Was he really a demon, or only a man born without either a heart or a conscience?

"You can face me, knowing now who I am, and ask that, Ethelbert Graindorge?" demanded Wild Kate, hoarsely.

"You charge me with being that person," calmly replied the dandy sport. "For the present I neither admit nor deny that I am he. I have listened attentively to your story, and so far you have failed to advance any proof that Ethelbert Graindorge is or was a criminal. As a man on trial for his life, I have a right to ask the whole grounds on which you bring your accusation against me."

Wild Kate, once more sternly calm, laughed shortly.

"You are on trial for life—and already condemned. When we two part this night, either you or I will be cold in death!"

"It will be my funeral, then, not yours," was the quiet response. "Pray continue. I have never heard this part of the story."

"Then you admit having heard—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, madam. I admit nothing, at present. When you have finished your version of Ethelbert Graindorge's crime, I may possibly make a last speech and confession—I believe that is the popular term for it."

There was a brief silence, then Wild Kate spoke again:

"It is an intricate and curiously involved affair, but I believe I can make it clear enough to your comprehension."

"I have told you how Henry Crickmore was taken prisoner and frightened into making full confession. Then, on a promise to accept him as State's evidence, he unfolded the diabolical scheme from first to last."

"The pretended conversion of Ethelbert Graindorge was but the first carefully planned step. That, and his long course of hypocrisy as a gambler-missionary, was intended to offset his wild and lawless record up to that date. A saint was far less likely to be suspected of fraud than a sinner. And before that pretended conversion startled the reading world, the fraud itself was fully determined upon, though the precise manner in which the details were to be carried out was not yet settled."

"Each one of those newspaper paragraphs was inspired by Ethelbert Graindorge, though his direct agency was not suspected, and by his cunning manipulation the newspapers opened their subscription lists for his benefit. The confiding public helped him to pay the first and second installments on the insurance policies he had taken out; nearly a score in all, and aggregating about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars! Rich reward for playing the hypocrite one year!"

"Six months after his conversion, came the news of his marriage—to a gentle and lovely country-maid, so the newspapers had it—the sister of Henry Crickmore, was the next rumor—in reality the wife of that worthy. She was very modest and retiring, seldom going out into society with her husband. Too frail, poor soul—was his excuse. Frail enough, she proved on investigation, but it was her uncontrollable passion for strong liquor that made Ethelbert Graindorge keep her so carefully secluded. And it was through this love of drink that the conspirators were finally enabled to carry their bold scheme along so successfully."

"Afraid to trust any one of the servants at the house where they boarded, this woman would leave the building after dark, and turning her cloak, muffling her face closely, enter some saloon or liquor store and come out with a bottle or two of the liquor she was ready to sell her soul for."

"It was during one of these expeditions that she first saw him—David Arbuckle."

Wild Kate uttered the name with a visible effort, one hand moving to her throat as though something was choking her. Easy Elbert said nothing, his great blue eyes fixed on the full moon with a dreamy stare.

"At first this woman believed he was her husband, so remarkable was the likeness that existed between the two, and she fled in terror, for Ethelbert Graindorge was as great a devil

in the bosom of his family as he was a saint in public, and she feared his rage. But he did not follow, and then, in hopes of securing a counterhold on him—for she saw that there were cards and liquor on the table before the man she never dreamed was other than her husband—she stole back and peered slyly at the man. He was still there, gambling, swearing, drinking. And as she watched, the woman gradually came to realize the truth. When she returned home that night, she had a strange story to tell, and David Arbuckle was doomed to suffer death as Ethelbert Graindorge."

"In the morning Henry Crickmore was set on his track. Before night he had learned all that he cared to know, and David Arbuckle was safe in the toils."

"Three days later, the announcement was made that the famous gambler-missionary had yielded to the entreaties of his friends, and taken a holiday which it was hoped would restore his strength and health and enable him to renew his heroic labor in the good cause."

"From first to last that was a lie. Ethelbert Graindorge, carefully disguised, was still in the city. David Arbuckle went with Henry Crickmore—to his death!"

"Little time as was lost after they discovered their victim and his marvelous resemblance to the chief villain, every detail of the foul plot had been carefully arranged, even to the point where Ethelbert Graindorge was to join them, still in disguise, and deal with his own hand the blow that was to win for them all a fortune."

"As agreed upon, just so was the hellish plot carried out. Ethelbert Graindorge rode into camp, and asking, was granted permission to remain over night and share their meals. He did eat supper with them, and then Henry Crickmore took a rifle from the wagon, on pretense of making a trade with the stranger. He fired the death-shot, while pretending to examine the weapon by the firelight. David Arbuckle fell back, dead, without a word or dying groan!"

"The hellish deed consummated, the assassin mounted his horse and fled at full speed, while Henry Crickmore went to spread the alarm—just as I have already detailed."

Wild Kate ceased speaking, and for a brief space there was silence. Easy Elbert, pale as a dead man, made no comment. He saw that the woman was fighting strongly to recover her composure. At length she succeeded, and in the same hard, monotonous tone with which she had spoken for the last few minutes, Wild Kate resumed:

"Such was the confession made by Henry Crickmore, and precisely similar was the story told by his wife, the woman whom Ethelbert Graindorge had pretended to marry, when she was arrested and questioned separately. Every effort was made to arrest the chief criminal, but all in vain."

"Now to explain my part in that tragedy."

"I lived with my parents in the country, not far from St. Charles, Mo. The Arbuckles were our near neighbors, and though both David and I were cursed with hasty tempers, we loved, and were married."

"One day we quarreled. It was a very little matter—my dancing with one who had once been a suitor for my hand—but one word brought on another, until I left the house, vowing never to return, never to recognize him again until he had come and humbly begged my pardon."

"I went home to my father, and there, my anger soon burning out, waited for David to follow me—waited two days, then, unable to longer resist the passionate longing to see him, I sent a message saying that I was ready to return and ask his forgiveness. The messenger returned, stating that David had gone, no person seemed to know where."

"I tried every means I could think of to find him, but in vain. We were never to meet again in this world!"

"Now you can guess why I took such a feverish interest in reading about the doings of Ethelbert Graindorge. David and I had seen him once, when he lectured in St. Louis. We were there on our wedding-trip. I noticed then the startling resemblance which existed between the two men."

"All this time the confession made by Henry Crickmore, and even his arrest, had been kept a close secret, while search was being made for Ethelbert Graindorge, and when an advertisement in the St. Louis papers, asking for the address of any of David Arbuckle's relatives, was shown to me, I had not even the faintest suspicion of the truth, though I immediately answered the advertisement."

"I have often wondered since then why I did not fall down dead when the horrible truth was revealed to me. My husband was dead—foully murdered—and we had parted with hot, angry words! I was stricken down with a brain fever, and for many long months all was a blank. They told me afterward that I had been insane."

"I was never the same being after my recovery. I could think only of vengeance. The confession had long been made public—Henry Crickmore and his wife were then in the State penitentiary—but nothing had been heard of

Ethelbert Graindorge. He had vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up for his crimes. But his face—the face worn by my murdered husband—was ever before me day and night. I swore, on my bended knees, beside the grave of David Arbuckle, never to know rest or quiet until I had found his assassin and killed him with my own hand. And at length I thought that fate was favoring me—

"You mean when we met that night in St. Louis," Easy Elbert interposed.

Wild Kate nodded, too faint to speak at once. The dandy sport saw this, and hastily added:

"I had just arrived in town, and, knowing nobody, dropped in at Ben De Bar's theater to pass away an hour or two. But I saw little of the play—only knew that jolly Ben himself was playing, as only he *could* play, the fat Knight of Windsor—for I was wholly absorbed in watching *you*. I could see nothing, think of nothing else, and when the cry of fire was given I still thought only of you, and in the wild, senseless panic which followed, your safety was my only thought. For myself I don't think I would have fought hard. Just returning to America, I learned something that made me reckless of life.

"I succeeded in carrying you clear of the building, and never knew until I reached the open air that the alarm of fire had been entirely without foundation.

"You were insensible, but I felt sure that it was only from fright and suffocation. I bent over you to restore your senses. Suddenly your eyes opened, and you uttered a terrible cry that rung in my ears for days after. I thought it was merely affright—

"It was because I recognized the face of Ethelbert Graindorge, my husband's assassin, whom I had sworn to kill!" cried Wild Kate, her black eyes flashing anew.

"Or thought you did," quietly added the dandy sport, his white teeth gleaming beneath his pointed mustaches as he spoke. "You sprung to your feet as you uttered that cry, and staggered back. I feared you would fall, and caught you in my arms. Instead, you shrieked out that name—Ethelbert Graindorge—and struck at me with a dagger. I bear the mark of the wound yet, and will carry it to the grave with me.

"As you struck, a policeman came up, and asked what was the matter. You demanded my arrest as the murderer of David Arbuckle, and the fellow collared me, sounding his call for assistance. I realized my danger, and feeling that I had still something to live for, knocked the fellow down and made my escape in the crowd.

"I disguised myself and remained in the city a week, resolved to learn who you were, though the curiosity should bring me to the scaffold. I did learn—that you were the widow of the man with whose murder Ethelbert Graindorge stood charged—and feeling how vain was the hope I had been nourishing, I left St. Louis—finally bringing up in this place, to encounter you once more."

"To meet the death you fled from then!" passionately cried the woman, suddenly drawing a revolver.

"That is as you may determine," coolly spoke the man, no trace of fear in his face or voice, no flinching in his form as he calmly confronted the deadly weapon. "But before you deal the finishing blow, you must listen to what I have to say. I fled then, because I knew that I could not clear myself of the charge you brought against me—"

"Yet you pretend you are not Ethelbert Graindorge!" cried Wild Kate, interrupting his speech.

"When did I say so? I neither admit nor deny the identity. You say that I am Ethelbert Graindorge. You say that you have sworn never to know rest until you have avenged the death of your husband. I do not blame you for taking that oath. Under similar circumstances, no doubt I would have done the same. Indeed, I too have taken an oath, even wilder and apparently more impossible of fulfillment than that of yours, since it rests wholly with you whether I succeed or fail. I stand here before you. My hands are tied with bonds a thousand-fold stronger than rawhide. You may kill me, and I will not lift a hand to stay your blow. But first, I would like your permission to tell you my vow. It may, possibly, help nerve your hand for the death-blow."

Despite the calmness with which he spoke, Easy Elbert's eyes were glowing with startling vividness, and Wild Kate felt that some terrible spell was being cast over her. She could not speak—but a slight inclination of her head was enough.

"Thanks! Now listen to the vow I have taken," and Easy Elbert spoke rapidly, passionately. "I never knew what it was to love until I saw you, that night, in St. Louis. I *did* know, then, and I resolved to learn who you were, and if still single, to woo and win you. You know what followed. I found out who you were, but with each day my love grew stronger, though I never expected to meet you again. But we have met—and now I repeat: I love you. I swear to win your love in return, and to make you my

wife, unless you slay me first. I swear never to admit or deny that I am or am not Ethelbert Graindorge, until you confess that you love me, regardless of my guilt or innocence."

"Stop!" cried Wild Kate, passionately. "You dare speak thus—"

"I dare more than speak—I will keep my vow unless you kill me first," he coolly interposed, never flinching or ceasing to smile as the loaded revolver was thrust almost into his face.

One moment thus—then Wild Kate flung the weapon far from her and pressed one hand over her heart. Then, with a low, sobbing cry, she turned and fled swiftly through the night!

CHAPTER XV.

OLD '49 CHANGES HIS IDENTITY.

BLACK and deadly was the hatred that urged Old '49 to creep still nearer the men who had rendezvoused in that secluded clump of timber. The suspicion which had first caused him to profit by the mistake of the hasty stranger, had long since died a violent death. The man whom he had sworn to guard against all other enemies was not in danger—instead, he was here, plotting against—whom?

"I'll find that out fust—then look out, Easy Elbert, *alias* Ethelbert Graindorge, *fer* you're my meat!"

Inch by inch the spy crept forward, hearing every word that was uttered in that clear, pleasant voice, but eager to gain a position from whence he could hold the speaker under his pistol, to kill or to grant a brief reprieve, as he should finally decide on learning the full purpose of this secret meeting.

"I was detained longer in town than I expected," Old '49 heard that mellow voice—the voice of Easy Elbert, the dandy sport—utter, "but there is no harm done. The work ahead of us is not so difficult but that we can finish it up and be back to town long before day-dawn."

"Course we're all ready, an' willin' to go right whar an' do jest what ye bid us, boss," said a voice which the spy believed was that of his double. "But I do hope thar's more money an' less bad dreams in it then in that rock business. Durned ef I've went to bed sober sence that come off, jest on 'count o' the nightmar'—"

"Possibly you are getting religious, Eugene Fields," interposed the man-with-Easy-Elbert's voice, sneeringly. "If so, you are too good for our company. My motto is *hands not hearts*. If you find you have too much of the latter, for perfect peace of mind, make the confession, and I will grant you an instant discharge—"

Peering out from his nest of underbrush, Old '49 could now distinguish the dim outlines of a dozen or more forms, looking more like grim phantoms than aught human in their black garbs. By the few rays of moonlight which shimmered down through the leafy canopy overhead, he saw one form glide swiftly forward with right arm extended, thrusting a gleaming pistol against the head of another black-cowled figure. He saw the latter spring away, and heard the tremulous voice of his double cry:

"I don't ax it, boss—I was only jokin'!"

"Keep a closer guard over your tongue, then, my man, or your joking will fill a grave with your carcass. No man can follow me who dares to criticise the work I set him, either before or after the job is accomplished. Not one of you all can say but that I pay you well for the work you do and risk you run."

"Tain't the work, ner yet the resk that troubles 'Gene—it's the lack o' whisky," chuckled one of the black-cowls. "Jest afore you come, he was axin' fer a horn, but we told him it was ag'inst orders fer to-night, an' that hit him right whar he was weak."

"No drinking to-night," was the firm response. "The work before us calls for clear brains and cool heads. When it is accomplished, and you are safe back in your usual haunts, of course you can indulge your appetites as much as you please, provided you keep a curb on your tongues."

"We're all ready, when you say the word, boss."

"One moment. I may as well give you an idea of the nature of the work cut out for you to-night, as we are less liable to be observed or spied upon here than almost any other point between this and our destination."

"I trust we can accomplish our purpose by a sudden break, and then avoid trouble, but it is only fair to tell you that we may have to do some brisk fighting first. If there is any one among you who feels his stomach weaken at this prospect, let him speak out now—Fields!" he cried sternly, wheeling upon one of the men who was moving away, half-doubled over, like one suffering from a severe attack of colic. "Halt! or I'll send a bullet through your craven heart!"

"Good Land! boss, 'tain't that—I've got to go!" whined the fellow, Old '49's double. "I ain't runnin' off—I'm ready to do as ye say, whisky or no whisky. I'd be a durned fool to run now, when I know that the hull kit o' ye would be huntin' me up in the morning—ough!"

A groaning yell, and Fields plunged into the bushes, followed by a general laugh from his comrades. But Old '49 did not feel so mirthful.

The fellow was heading direct for the point where he lay in ambush, and unless he should turn aside right speedily, discovery was almost inevitable. True, by leaping to his feet and taking to speedy flight, the veteran had enough confidence in his powers to feel well assured that he could elude such pursuit as might be made; but that must be only a final resource.

He had heard just enough to make him eager to learn more. Besides, he believed that the man called "boss" was none other than the one who had doomed him to be buried alive—Ethelbert Graindorge—Easy Elbert.

Flattening himself beneath the bushes, Old '49 grasped a bowie-knife in one hand, a revolver in the other, but meaning to use them only in case of absolute necessity.

Fortunately for himself, Eugene Fields crashed past the spy without discovering him, and acting on a sudden impulse, Old '49 silently turned around and followed on his track, what little sound his cat-like footsteps gave out being drowned by the hasty movements of his double.

"Ef it wasn't played slick, then I don't want a cent!" chuckled the fellow, coming to a pause when close to the edge of the underbrush. "Them durned cusses cain't shet down my licker, 'specially when I kin feel the snakes begin to crawl, as I do now—devil take 'em! A hard ride an' hot work, sech as I know they is ahead when the boss talks like he do to-night, would wind me up ef I didn't—" and his husky speech was cut short by a peculiar gurgling sound.

Crouching close behind him, Old '49 saw the fellow produce and uncork a bottle, then drink heartily—so very heartily that the flask was drained and cast aside as useless before he paused to take breath.

"Thar!" he grunted, with a long sigh of comfort. "I kin last the night out now, work or no work—"

He said no more. Holding a naked knife between his teeth, Old '49 arose, and with one long stride stood close behind his double. Like a vise his long, sinewy fingers closed around the man's throat, while one knee was raised and planted against the small of his back. One fierce effort, and the fellow fell, trying in vain to shout out an alarm. Tighter and closer grew that terrible gripe upon his throat, while now a heavy weight lay upon his back, holding his arms and legs from thrashing about. And then—utter oblivion.

It was no part of the veteran's purpose to commit murder, though he knew that this wretch had been one of those who dug his grave and buried him alive beneath that huge rocky mass. When satisfied that his double was really senseless, not playing possum, he relaxed his grasp and quickly removed the black cowl, robe and gauntlets. From a bit of dry wood he quickly fashioned a serviceable gag, which he thrust between his prisoner's jaws, tying it in place with a strip cut from the fellow's shirt. With the same swift dexterity he bound him hand and foot, then rolled him into the deepest shadow he could find. This done, Old '49 donned the black suit over his own garments, and stood out the perfect double of Eugene Fields.

Nor was his work accomplished any too soon. "Time's up, Fields!" called the stern voice of the "boss."

"Comin'—durn it all! ef you fellers hed sech a pesky p'izen cramp—wuss'n a dozen tom-cats, chasin' a thousan' big he cats, 'round an' 'round—you'd do somethin' sides grin an' snicker, ef it was only to give me the smell o' the cork of a whisky bottle!"

A rare mimic Old '49 proved himself, for not one of the party dreamed that he was an enemy instead of the partner in evil he was in outward seeming.

"Whisky enough when the work is done—not one drop before," firmly responded the black-robed chief. "Get your horses now, and follow me!"

At the further side of the little opening where the black riders had gathered, Old '49 saw the horses, and moving forward with the rest, he was about to unfasten the animal which he felt sure he recognized as that ridden hither by his double, when a rough hand fell upon his shoulder and a harsh voice growled:

"Skin out o' that, 'Gene Fields! Take your own crow bait, an' let a gentleman's hoss alone—you hear me!"

"Ough! them durned cramps ag'in!" groaned the spy, doubling up and hopping from one foot to the other like a turkey on hot iron. "It jest makes me plum blind—"

"Come here, Fields," sternly cried the leader.

"Are you in earnest, or only playing off?"

"Playin'—ough!" and Old '49 doubled up like a jack-knife. "Hope I may die ef I kin—ow—wow!"

"Here—take a swallow of this," and the chief produced a leather-covered flask. "But if I find out you have been playing old soldier, I'll make you rue the trick as long as you live!"

Old '49 clutched the flask eagerly, and drank heartily. The cramp antidote acted like magic—possibly because the shrewd fellow saw that all of the men were now mounted, leaving only one horse unappropriated, which could only belong to him, in his new identity.

"Lord love ye, boss!" he exclaimed, in husky

gratitude as he returned the flask. "May you never know what it is to hev a hull durned menadery turned loose in your stomach—an' every cussed critter fightin' fer dear life!"

"That's enough—mount!" was the stern reply. "But bear this one point in mind. If you utter another one of those unearthy howls when we are at work, I'll shoot you with something surer than a pocket pistol, and in a less fire-proof point than your throat. You understand?"

Old '49 turned away to his horse with a growl of disgust.

"Ef anybody thinks I'm doin' it jest fer fun, may the devil send 'em a dose o' the same circus—so thar!"

"Silence! not another word!"

The black-robed chief led the way at a rapid trot, and falling in among the rear men, Old '49 rode after him, his eyes and ears wide open, for, be it remembered, as yet he had not the faintest idea of the nature of the work for which he had so recklessly enlisted. But not a word was spoken by his mates. Either they already knew, or else did not care, what the work was that awaited them.

Nor was Old '49 greatly disturbed by it. Before him rode the man whom he had sworn to hunt down to the gallows, though it took the whole of his remaining years. Of him alone he thought—of Ethelbert Graindorge and how best he could effect his capture, *alive and unharmed*.

This important point was still unsolved, when the chief abruptly drew rein and dismounted.

"It would not be safe to take our animals any closer," he said, leading the way into the timber and securing his horse, an example which his followers promptly copied. "Now listen," he added, speaking rapidly as the black-robed figures stood before him. "What little I need add, must be spoken here, for up yonder a single word or incautious sound might spoil the whole job. I will only need four men as my aids. The rest will act under your command, Harney. Those whom I selected, will stand over to the right."

Old '49 made a movement, but was abruptly jerked back by the man who stood nearest him, who growled:

"Not you, Fields—you b'long to my gang."

"I didn't know—I wasn't there when he called 'em over, an' he's so pepper-hot to-night, I thought I'd be on the safe side," was the reply, but the speaker was far more bitterly disappointed than his words would seem to indicate, just why, the intelligent reader can readily divine.

"You know your share of the work, Harney," continued the chief. "Gain a position where you will have good cover, but close enough so you can knock over every one who breaks out. One or two shots will be enough, I reckon. There is hardly ever more than four men on guard at night. Be ready, but don't make a sound until I open the ball. Then put in your good work the best you can. Am I understood?"

"Plum through, boss," promptly replied his lieutenant.

"Then lead off. I'll hang behind until you are secure in your position, for your point is the most important. I'll have only one man and two girls to deal with."

Tobe Harney seemed suspicious of 'Gene Fields, as he believed Old '49 to be, judging from the manner in which he kept close beside him, and the spy was forced to march on, as yet ignorant of what lay before him, though a few moments later the terrible truth flashed upon his brain.

He recognized the lone cabin of the Wilders—he saw the buildings before the mouth of the Silver Brick mine—and he knew that worse than murder and robbery was intended.

His whole soul revolted, but what could he do? Nine men were beside and around him, any one of whom would cut his throat or blow his brains out without the slightest compunction, were they to even suspect his identity. Should he raise the alarm, it could only result in his own death, without it the least benefiting those whom he sought to save.

Truly, Old '49 had run his head into a pretty hornet's nest!

Still he did not entirely despair, though he knew that, in saving the Wilder family, he must give over his hopes of capturing Ethelbert Graindorge, at least on the present occasion. Only for an instant did he hesitate. There was a good and all-sufficient reason why he should prove faithful to the family of George Wilder.

There was one point in his favor. The party to which he was attached was to first secure their position commanding the quarters of Periander Pettigrew and the men who acted as guard over the Silver Brick, before the chief struck his blow at the inmates of the cabin. This would give him more time to perfect the bold plan he had already devised.

Stealthily the black-robed figures crawled along among the rocks and bushes that lined the hillside, creeping up the slope like human lizards, to reach the narrow level that lay in front of the buildings around the mine-entrance. And all the time Old '49 noticed that the leader

of his division, Tobe Harney, kept within arm's length of him. Was it through accident, or was the man whose place he had taken, suspected of having or wishing to play his comrades false?

Old '49 felt like cursing the fates which had so arranged it, but none the less he resolved to frustrate the vile plot, or lose his own life in the effort.

"Steady, now!" muttered Harney, as the party neared the level where only a narrow fringe of bushes could conceal them from the gaze of any who might be on watch at the cave-mouth against prowling thieves in quest of rich ore. "Mind what the boss said. Five hundred dollars to be vided among us, extry wages, ef we rub out that long-legged overseer, Perry Pettigrew. So make sure work o' him ef he shows his nose outside when the music begins!"

Another minute and they were lying in a clump, directly on the edge of the level ground, their weapons fully commanding the Silver Brick buildings.

Old '49 cast a swift glance to the right. He could see that the party led by the chief was nearing the cabin, and knew that he must act now or never.

His right hand closed upon a heavy piece of quartz, and this he hurled full against the head of Tobe Harney, who fell without a groan. Quick as thought the old man caught up a second and third stone, casting them with all his power among the startled and bewildered black crows.

Leaping up and aside, he drew his revolver, shouting loudly as he opened fire upon the rascals.

"Keep under kiver, all you honest souls in the cabin and mine, for thar's deviltry abroad! Keep close, or you'll be all massycreed! The road-agents is layin' fer ye!"

Three shots Old '49 fired, aiming to disable rather than kill, continuing to utter his shrill words of warning, while the amazed black-gowns shrunk away from him as though they believed Eugene Fields had suddenly gone mad. Then—

A single revolver shot rung out from the rear, and Old '49, with a gasping cry, fell forward upon his face!

CHAPTER XVI.

OLD '49 IN A TIGHT PLACE.

THAT avenging shot was fired by the chief.

For some reason, as yet only known to himself, he had left his own squad and followed after that of Tobe Harney, possibly to give him some instructions forgotten until now. Fearing to utter any cry or signal lest those whom he wished to surprise should take the alarm, he stole along under cover until he beheld the sudden and furious outburst of—as he believed—one of his men.

For a moment he was too astounded to do aught, but when the voice of Old '49 rung out in warning to the inmates of cabin and mine buildings, the brief spell was broken.

His revolver was jerked forth and discharged even as he leaped forward. The seeming madman flung up his arms and fell forward on his face, with a hollow groan.

But the veteran's self-sacrifice was not all in vain. From the mine building came loud shouts, followed by the rapid discharge of firearms, and a leaden shower cut through the thin line of bushes with an ugly zip-zip, or else flattened against the rocks.

"Down, men!" shouted the chief as he leaped forward and dragged the limp form of the disguised spy below the level. "Lie close, but riddle every rascal that dares show his head out of yonder hole!"

High above the firing rose his voice while speaking these words, for they were intended for the benefit of the Silver Brick guards, but he added in a voice that could be heard only by his own men:

"Brown and Jackson, you two must hold these fellows in check for a few minutes. Keep below the level, but dodge back and forth, sending a shot into the building every few moments no matter about the aim. The rest of you pick up these lads and carry them down to the road—lively, now!"

Even as he spoke, the chief was bending over the body of the spy, tearing the black cowl from his face. An angry curse broke forth as he recognized the face—that of Eugene Fields, as he firmly believed, now streaked with fresh blood. With a fierce regret that death had come to the traitor so suddenly, he felt for the wound. A furrow cut through the scalp over one ear—but the bone beneath gave no evidence of being fractured. It was possible that he had only been stunned, not killed, and flinging the limp form over his shoulder, he ran down the slope as though entirely unburdened, followed by all save the two men left behind to hold Periander Pettigrew and his men in check.

"Carpenter, tie this devil—if he escapes, I'll blow your brains out!" he panted, dropping Old '49 to the ground when the road was reached. "All the rest follow me—quick!"

Everything seemed to work against the carefully laid plans of the chief, thanks to the un-

expected part which Old '49 had taken in the proceedings.

The alarm which he raised, not only put the mine-overseer on guard, but it also aroused the inmates of the cabin. Easy-going George Wilder could act energetically enough when the necessity arose, and leaping out of bed, he grasped his weapons and flung open the cabin door, just in time to hear the last words shouted out by Old '49. He heard, too, the rapid fusillade which Pettigrew and his guards opened, and was on the point of rushing to their aid, when one of the four black-crows selected by the chief, fired at him.

It was a blundering shot in more senses than one—unlucky for the hopes of the black band, but very fortunate for George Wilder, since the missile sped past without touching him, and showed him that death must follow if he persisted in his rash idea of leaving the cabin. Swift as thought he answered the ambushed shot, then leaped back and swung the heavy oaken door to, just in time to intercept a volley of pistol balls from the four outlaws.

If the chief had been present, all this would have been changed. Not a shot would have been fired when George Wilder started to leave the cabin, until he had gone too far to return before he could be intercepted, and the main purpose of the night ride thus insured. But right there is where fortune played the black chief a scurvy trick. Not anticipating an alarm before his return, he had given his men no particular orders, and they, confused by the sudden outbreak among their fellows, blundered as detailed.

Luckily for them, the chief did not suspect the actual facts, but naturally supposed that Wilder had fired the first shot from under cover, knowing that the cabin was provided with loopholes. Nor did his men, now realizing what an unpardonable blunder they had committed, show any eagerness to enlighten him as he rushed up the steep hillside to their support.

"Ten thousand curses on that traitor, Fields!" he panted, pausing for an instant to catch his breath, and beckoning for his men to hasten up the hill. "Only for his treachery, all would have worked smoothly enough! But we can't turn tail without one effort to redeem ourselves. You see that log out yonder? We can dash out, pick that up and smash in the door before old Wilder can fire more than one or two shots."

"But them two shots may kill!" muttered a voice from the crowded mass of black-gowns—just which one the chief could not tell—and he fiercely demanded:

"Who was it that spoke then?"

There came no answer. The sentiments uttered by that voice were those held by the majority, if not all of the band. For a few moments the chief waited for an answer, then, with drawn revolver, he said, sternly:

"All right, if you think old Wilder can shoot faster and straighter than I can—for that is just what it amounts to. I'll lead the rush for that timber, and I expect you to back me up. Any one who skulks or holds back, will have to settle with me!"

Plain talk, every word of which was uttered in dead earnest. Not one who heard them doubted this, and the incipient mutiny was nipped in the bud. As nearly always happens when two dangers present themselves between which a choice must be made, the black-gowns preferred to risk the most distant one, and when the chief broke cover, they one and all followed close at his heels.

Crack—crack—crack!

For once in his life easy-going George Wilder was thoroughly awakened, and his revolvers kept up a steady stream of flame through one of the loopholes, nor was all of his lead wasted.

At the first shot the black chief started convulsively, like a horse that unexpectedly receives a sharp touch of the spur—but then he ran on more swiftly than before, reaching and stooping over the heavy timber which he intended to use as a battering-ram.

A shrill scream of terrible agony—one of the men spinning sharply around, tossing both hands into the air as he fell to the ground, writhing and twisting convulsively in the throes of death.

A snarling curse of mingled pain and rage from another told of a broken arm, and then—

From the cabin came two heavy reports as a double-barreled shot gun was discharged, sending a shower of bird-shot into the midst of the black-gowns just as they crowded together about the log! Scarcely one there but received a share of the stinging dose, which created a greater panic than could a dozen bullets. Even the chief was willing to beat a retreat, which he did, first snatching up the corpse of the black-gown and tossing it across his shoulders.

"Back to cover, boys!" he shouted, and be sure none of his men required a second order to that effect.

But run as swiftly, leap as erratically as they might, the leaden pills from the cabin sped still faster, and one more of the black riders was marked for life before the cover was reached.

All this time the guards of the mine, under Periander Pettigrew, had been held in check by the two black-gowns detailed for that purpose

by the chief. By swiftly running back and forth, thrusting their pistols up over the escarpment to fire, the cunning rascals made enough noise and display for a dozen. But the long overseer was plucky as the best, and when he heard the rapid firing at the cabin, mingled with the screams and curses of those stricken down by the leaden shower, he called on those with him for a charge to rescue their employer and his helpless daughters.

It was abandoning his trust, but what man, young, hot-blooded and above all, over head and ears in love, could have acted differently? Let the Silver Brick go, so that gentle Mabel Wilder was saved!

Without waiting to see what response his fellow guards would make, Periander left his cover and rushed out into the moonlight. He and was heard, and seen recognized.

Brown and Jackson, intent only on earning the extra reward which had been promised for the death of Pettigrew, rose up from their cover and fired at the half-distracted lover.

The poor fellow faltered and almost fell—then wheeled suddenly and discharged one shot at the outlaws. He could do no more. He fell forward upon his face, and his men, rushing out, caught him up in their arms and bore him back under cover, the hot life-blood gushing over their hands.

But poor Periander did not fall wholly un-avenged. His last shot, though fired by instinct and without any aim, had crashed its way through the brain of Brown.

The survivor, Jackson, at that moment heard the signal for retreat given by the black chief, and though but a small man, he managed to shoulder the corpse of his mate and descend the slope, unmolested.

In a terrible rage was the black chief when he drew off his forces, and in the road below, out of pistol range, he counted up his losses. One man killed by George Wilder; one with a broken arm, another with a splintered jaw, himself with a bullet-gashed side while all were liberally sprinkled with fine shot, painful enough, even if not dangerous.

And the list from the other squad was even more disastrous. Brown dead, Harney dead, his skull shattered like an eggshell, Stevenson dead, and two others wounded—all save the first being the victims of Old '49—the traitor, Eugene Fields, as he firmly believed. And at his door likewise lay all the rest. Only for him the carefully laid plan must have succeeded in its entirety. Instead, four dead men and half a score wounded!

"Pick up the bodies and make for the horses," the black chief said, as soon as he could cut off his flood of curses sufficiently to utter aught else. "There's not much to fear from those fellows up yonder, but some one else may have heard the firing, and carry word into town. Carpenter—is that infernal traitor alive?"

"Reckon he is, though he hain't spoke none—"

"Good!" was the savage interjection as the black chief dealt the prostrate form a heavy kick in the ribs. "Catch hold. He's got only one life, but he shall pay for all these poor fellows, as far as that life can do it. On—as quick as you can!"

The members of the black band were willing enough to travel. The veriest glutton among them had experienced enough fighting for that night!

They soon reached the spot where they had hitched their horses, and tying the dead men into their respective saddles, while others were hastily binding up the more serious wounds, five minutes later saw them riding out into the moonlight, the chief at their head, holding the halter of the horse on which the prisoner was securely bound.

A wild cry broke from the lips of the black chief as he abruptly jerked up his horse. A man was running swiftly along the road toward them—a man whom he and each one of his followers instantly recognized—the very man whom they believed had so bitterly betrayed them—Eugene Fields!

"A durned dirty trick, whoever done it!" spluttered Fields, fairly beside himself with rage. "Whar is he? Show him to me! I kin lick seventeen kinds o' stuffin' out o' the dirty cuss!"

With a furious curse, the black chief turned upon his prisoner—to see him fully conscious, to hear him laughing!

"Who are you?" he snarled, clutching at the man's throat. "Speak, or I'll choke the life out o' you!"

"I'm 'Gene Fields," was the prompt response, as Old '49 avoided the black-gloved hand by nimbly jerking his head back. "That feller's gone crazy—I'm the only ginewine simon-pure 'Gene Fields, an' he's a 'postor!"

From the ledge on which the cabin and mine buildings stood, came a loud shout, followed by a rifle shot, the ragged lead whistling through the crowd and knocking up the dust beyond them—a most significant hint that that was neither the time nor place for an inquiry into the mystery.

"Jump up behind one of the boys, Fields," sternly uttered the chief, setting his horse in

motion. "The whole country will be aroused at this rate. We must take to the hills, where we can bury our dead. If they are found and recognized, there will be trouble for such of us who are known as their mates."

"I'm bleedin' like a stuck hog, boss," said the man whose arm was broken, as they rode briskly along. "I cain't make a long ride—an' then when this cussed business gits wind, folks'll know that's whar I got my hurt!"

"You and Johnson are the only ones hurt so bad that it can't be concealed. Drop off from the party, and slip back into town. Arrange it so as to suit yourselves, but unless you can think of something better, get up a mock fight, and swear that you shot each other. You can do it so no one will ever suspect the truth."

This was really a brilliant idea, and was eagerly acted upon by Johnson, the man with the shattered jaw, and him with the broken arm.

The remainder soon left the road leading to Purgatory, entering a narrow pass through the range, riding rapidly along under the guidance of their chief for nearly two hours.

Not a word was spoken by any of the party, after a stern threat from the leader had checked the simon-pure Fields, who smothered his indignation at the risk of bursting.

"We can't find a better spot for our business than this," at length uttered the chief, drawing rein in a small level spot, deep in the heart of the hills. "Our brethren can rest here without fear of disturbance until the crack of doom!"

Dismounting, he stood by the side of his prisoner, a drawn revolver covering him while the ropes which held him in the saddle were cut, and he lifted to the ground. At a motion of his hand, Old '49 was bound beyond the possibility of either flight or resistance, though able to stand erect unbeld.

"Now, Eugene Fields, step forth and give an account of yourself," the black chief sternly said.

He was promptly obeyed, Fields telling a straight-forward story, with the exception of omitting all allusion to the whisky.

After returning to consciousness, he struggled desperately to free himself, and finally succeeded. Then he hastened on in the direction of the firing, arriving as described.

"I thought some o' the boys had played me the dirty trick, an' ef they did, I'll hev revenge ef it costs me the last drop o' my heart's blood!" he concluded, savagely.

"What have you to say?" demanded the chief, turning upon Old '49, a cold deliberateness in both tone and manner, that was far more threatening than any angry outburst.

But quite as cool was the veteran, though he knew that his life was in danger so great that little short of a miracle could save it.

"Jest what I said afore. I'm 'Gene Fields. That pore critter is a crazy man, 'most likely—"

"Fields or not, you have killed two good men, and been the cause of two others meeting their death. That is enough to settle your fate, a thousand times over. But if you and Fields were in collusion—ha!"

The moon shone down upon the uncovered head of the prisoner, and falling fairly upon his face, revealed something that cut the black chief short. With an eager exclamation he stepped forward and twining his fingers in Old '49's shaggy beard, pulled it from his face!

A still sharper cry broke from his lips as he started back—a cry that was echoed in tones of terror by Eugene Fields and several others of the band.

"Peter Stroud—the man we buried under the rock!"

"Come back from the grave to repeat his proposal, Ethelbert Graindorge!" said Old '49, with a ghastly smile.

Had his limbs been at liberty, the old man could have effected an escape then without a single hand being raised to check his flight, so complete was the surprise, so great the terror and superstition of his enemies. But he could only stand erect and stiff, grimly enjoying the consternation which his unmasking had produced.

The black chief was the first to recover from the shock, though his voice was unsteady as he spoke:

"You escaped me once by what seems a miracle—for I watched you, bound, in your grave, until that rock toppled over on top of you—a weight sufficient to crush a stone statue into powder! But this time I will make sure that you are dead before I bury you."

"You've got the upper hand now, go it while ye kin," said Old '49, speaking easily—wonderously easy for a man who felt that he was certainly death-doomed. "I was a fool for listenin' to your smooth tongue—for not strikin' when I had the chaine down thar. But don't crow afore you're clean out o' the woods, Easy Elbert, sense ye seem to prefer that name to the one ye used to b'ar. I didn't trust ye altogether, as ye may remember. I thought mebbe you would be tryin' to double onto me when I was off my guard, an' to make sure that full justice was done in the end, I had 'ranged things so another and surer bloodhound'll take up the trail right whar you choke me off."

"Bah!" sneeringly replied the black chief. "You are lying, in hopes to scare me into letting you go, but even if I knew you were speaking the truth, that would be only one more reason why I should kill you. I am not Easy Elbert, whoever else I may be, and if your successor takes his trail, I am safe enough. Old man, you have overshot your mark!"

"You half-fooled me once—you cain't do it again," was the quiet reply, in a tone of positive conviction. "You're the critter as passes down thar as Easy Elbert, but your real name is Ethelbert Graindorge, the man who killed David Arbuckle—"

So much he said, but no more. The black chief struck him sharply in the mouth, cutting his speech short, then cried to his men, sternly: "Gag him, or he may make trouble for us by his screams when we come to exact the punishment due his deeds. So! Now drag him over to yonder stub and bind him to it, in an upright position. Be lively!"

His orders were promptly carried out. Old '49 was securely gagged, then bound to the stump of a dead pine, standing close to the upper end of the little oval plot.

"Leave him there for a few moments, and dispose of the dead. Lay them in the hollow, over yonder, and cover them over with stones. May we all have as good a grave when our time comes to cross the range!"

There was little time wasted over the burial. These men were used to violent deaths, and all were eager to witness the doom of the man whom they had once buried—who had escaped that doom after some marvelous fashion, only to fall in their power once more.

"Old man," said the black chief, gravely. "You have wrought us too much harm to be allowed to die easily. You shall suffer a separate death for each one of those four men. First, we will practice on you with knives."

"Ready, lads! Range yourselves in line, to follow my lead. Don't aim for his life, but try to make each blade taste blood. Ha!" he exclaimed as a dense cloud began spreading over the face of the moon. "You are granted a brief reprieve, Peter Stroud—make the most of it, for when the light returns, the band will begin to play!"

Fainter and fainter grew the light, and then that little opening among towering rocks in the heart of the hills, grew black and blacker. Not a word was spoken, not a sound made save those of the horses in champing the bits and pawing.

Then the cloud passed from over the moon—Merciful Heavens! Yonder stood the weather-bleached stub, but where was the prisoner? Gone—leaving no trace behind him!

CHAPTER XVII.

EASY ELBERT PLAYS TRUMPS.

EASY ELBERT made no effort to check Wild Kate when she flung aside her pistol and fled from the presence of the man whom she had solemnly sworn to slay—but dare not.

The grave, earnest look was gone from his face. In its place came a smile that fairly glorified his features, and almost unconsciously these words dropped from his lips:

"The poor girl fights well, but it is no use! Struggle as she may, after this night's experience she is wholly in my power and helpless as a fly caught in a spider-web! She will break her vow, just as I will keep mine. I will win her—ay! win and wear her even though I had killed every relative she had on earth, instead of only one!"

He stooped and picked up the discarded pistol, gazing at it for a moment as it gleamed in the moonlight, then softly pressing his lips to the pearl handle, still warm from the grasp of the woman whom he loved so ardently.

A low, soft laugh as he glanced swiftly around him.

"If any one should see that, their verdict would be 'dead gone'—and not so far wrong, either! Until I met her, I never knew what love meant—had never seen a woman at whom I cared to look a second time. But now! Well, some would think it a curious way to set about winning a woman, but I believe it is my only chance, and I mean to play the game for all it's worth!"

The pearl-handled weapon disappeared in his bosom, and like one lost in a deep reverie, Easy Elbert paced slowly along the road leading to the Silver Brick mine.

What his thoughts were, can only be surmised, for no more words fell in audible tones from his lips.

Suddenly he paused, his head drawn erect, like that of a startled deer. The rapid reports of firearms came to his ears, despite the unfavorable breeze—faint and deceptive owing to the broken ridges which each gave birth to a different echo, but not to be mistaken by one whose life had so often led him through burning powder.

"Somebody having a circus—there, again!" he muttered, as other explosions fought their way against the brisk breeze. "They mean business, whoever—"

He paused abruptly, with a swift, comprehensive glance around him, to the more accu-

ately fix his location. And then the suspicion which had flashed across his mind, became a certainty.

"It's at or near the Silver Brick mine!" he muttered, moving rapidly forward. "And Kate—if she should run right into the row!"

Easy Elbert broke into a run as this startling thought struck him, for Wild Kate, in leaving him, had fled in the direction of her home. He had thoughts only for her, now, and in hopes of overtaking her before she could reach the spot where the fighting was going on, Easy Elbert ran as he had never run when only his own life hung in the balance. But he was fated not to overtake the woman.

Was it only fancy, or did he hear a scream, short as though abruptly choked off, but either of fear or agony—the scream of a woman? If a reality, she who uttered it could not be many rods ahead, and the dandy sport put on a fresh burst of speed that carried him over the ground with wonderful rapidity. Too fast for safety, along that rough road, where the rocks, trees and brush cast broad butts of dense shade. His foot struck against some obstacle, and Easy Elbert fell headlong, rolling over and over, then lying still as though stunned or slain outright.

Though he would have been reluctant to believe it, that fall, unlucky as he thought it, actually saved Easy Elbert's life.

He had fallen heavily, unable to save himself with all his remarkable activity. Fortunately for his bones, that part of the road ran through a streak of clay which was comparatively free from stones. Even as it was, the dandy sport lay like one dead for fully a quarter of an hour.

Gasping, rubbing his head, which had received the worst of the shock, Easy Elbert sat up at length, staring around him in a bewildered manner—but not for long. Like a flash came back the remembrance of that scream, and staggering to his feet, he pressed on as rapidly as he could.

With each moment his strength returned, the shower of stars and dancing fireworks grew less as his vision came back more clearly, and Easy Elbert was something like his usual self when he heard the clatter of iron-shod hoofs on the flinty soil not far ahead.

Instantly pausing, he listened intently. A considerable body of cavalry was coming along the road toward him, and Easy Elbert instinctively sought cover among the undergrowth along the road where the shadows lay deepest.

His brain was still confused from his fall. As frequently happens, he did not know that he had lost consciousness—believed that he had almost instantly regained his feet—and quite naturally connected these night-riders with the cry for help which he had heard.

As the reader is aware, Easy Elbert was mistaken in this suspicion, for the horsemen were those under the command of the black chief, retreating from their disastrous attack on the Silver Brick mine, thanks to the bold conduct of Old '49.

At a point a hundred yards or more from the cover to which the dandy sport had betaken himself, the black riders turned from the road into a narrow defile. While doing so, the moonlight fell clearly upon them, and Easy Elbert fancied he recognized the bowed form of Wild Kate, sitting bound upon the horse beside which the leader rode—a mistake which he could not have made were his eyes clear and keen as usual.

For a few moments his brain throbbed as though it must burst. Who were these strange black riders? Why should they take Wild Kate prisoner? What terrible doom menaced her?

By a violent exertion of his will, Easy Elbert calmed himself, and seeing that his weapons were ready for use, he glided forward and entered the pass, resolved to solve the mystery, to rescue the woman he so madly loved, or sacrifice his life in the effort.

It was a long and difficult chase. Perhaps this was fortunate for the dandy sport, since it gave him ample time to recover entirely from that ugly fall, and regain the cool and ready wit for which he was noted.

For an hour or more, he failed to discover the error he had fallen into, since, to avoid discovery himself, he was obliged to keep a certain distance between himself and the rearmost riders, but then, as the party pressed closer together when riding over a bit of level ground, Easy Elbert saw that Old '49 was the prisoner, instead of Kate Wilder.

For one instant his heart throbbed quickly with a savage sort of exultation, and his eyes glowed like living coals.

"If they kill him, there's one stumbling-block out of the way! A true bloodhound, he'll never leave this scent until he runs me down, or—"

That the dandy sport was not *all* bad, the hot flush which reddened his face at his own base thoughts, bore evidence. And then, as if to make amends, he once more pressed on after the rapidly moving horsemen, never relaxing his efforts until the black chief drew rein in the secluded spot which he had selected for the grave of the man whom he called Peter Stroud.

The few glances which the black riders cast

around them, told plainer than words that they had no suspicions of being spied upon, but nevertheless Easy Elbert knew that his eagerness to be of service to the prisoner, avowed enemy though Old '49 was, had led him into serious danger. Should the black riders quickly finish their work and then retrace their steps, they could not help but discover the spy in that narrow passage. That he would show fight, and strike hard before giving in, goes without saying, but lightly as he held life as a general thing, the dandy sport just now felt that he had a good deal to live for.

"I'll save the old rascal if I can, but I don't think I'm called on to cut my own throat in doing it!" he muttered, rapidly yet silently beating a retreat, keenly scrutinizing every foot of the rock walls which rose abruptly on each hand, in search of a point where one or the other might be scaled.

Ere long he found a crevice in the right hand wall, by means of which he believed he could secure a position commanding the black riders. In this hope he was not disappointed, but the necessity for caution, to avoid being discovered, rendered his progress painfully slow, and kept Easy Elbert from overhearing what could hardly help being of great interest to him—the brief conversation which took place between the black chief and his defiant prisoner.

"None too soon!" thought the dandy sport, crouching down behind and peering through a stunted bush at the black-gowns, who were then binding Old '49 to the pine stub, almost directly beneath the position of the spy. "Those fellows mean business in good earnest. Ha! where have I heard that voice before?" he asked himself in eager wonder as the sable chief bade his men hasten to bury their dead.

Little wonder that he was attracted by that voice, since it was almost an exact counterpart of his own tones, but the dandy sport had no time to waste in puzzling his brain over that fact just then. The black riders worked rapidly, and if he counted on saving Old '49 from the doom which threatened him, he must decide quickly on the proper course to pursue.

At no little risk of attracting attention, Easy Elbert closely scanned his surroundings, especially the space which lay between himself and the prisoner, a frown gradually deepening upon his brow as the disagreeable conclusion forced itself upon him.

"Not much comfort in the prospect!" flashed through his mind. "No cover to stop a bullet, no chance to run save by the way I came, and that open to their fire for a full hundred yards. Any sensible man would shut his eyes, stop his ears, and lay low until the circus ended—but I was ever a fool, and I'm too old now to go back on my record."

There seemed only one course left open for him to follow, if he hoped to save Old '49 from his impending fate. He was but one man—there were still nine of the black riders, including their chief. Long odds for any man to engage, even with the advantage of a complete surprise, but when the burial was completed, and the black chief bade his men draw their knives and fall into line, Easy Elbert held a revolver in each hand, his teeth clinched, his eyes glowing. The veteran should not be tortured while he lived.

Then came the brief reprieve granted by the dense cloud passing over the face of the moon. Easy Elbert saw his chance, and instantly acted upon it.

Snatching off his boots, he replaced his revolvers, drawing a knife instead, then swiftly descended from his perch. Thanks to his former close scrutiny, he was enabled to do this with perfect silence, and in ten seconds more, stood close behind the bound and gagged prisoner.

"A friend!" he breathed softly, touching Old '49 on the shoulder, then swiftly severing the folds of the lariat with which the veteran was bound. "Not a sound. Hang onto my coat-tail and step as near as you can in my tracks."

Being gagged, of course the veteran made no reply, but that he had his wits all about him, was clear enough from the perfect manner in which he obeyed orders.

Not a sound betrayed their retreat, and had there been a short path by which the upper ledge could have been abandoned, the mystery of that bold rescue would never have been solved by the black riders. Or if the friendly black cloud had been of a little greater extent, so that the two men could have stolen along the ledge for a hundred yards or more to a point where they might leave it—but as he regained his former position, Easy Elbert saw that this hope would be in vain. Already the edge of the cloud was showing a silvery light—in twenty seconds more the full moon would be unvailed.

"Take this," he whispered, thrusting a revolver into the old man's hand, then cut the thong that held the uncomfortable gag in place. "Shoot to kill if they crowd us, but no bloodshed if we can possibly bluff them off!"

"Good!" exclaimed Old '49 in the same guarded tones. "I want *him* alive. If you must shoot him, shoot only to cripple, not kill!"

Easy Elbert smiled rather grimly to himself, for he saw that as yet Old '49 had not recognized him, and the eagerness displayed by the veteran in speaking of the black chief, threw light upon the question of the perplexing voice. *It was the very counterpart of his own!*

The cloud rolled past. The moon shone out brightly, and the black riders stared in amazement—almost terror—at the vacant spot where they had left the prisoner bound hand and foot.

Easy Elbert could hardly keep from laughing aloud as he saw how thoroughly superstition had seized upon them. A few shots then would have sent the survivors flying in mad terror—but, foolish as his scruples may seem, he could not bring himself to pull trigger.

"Ready!" he whispered, as he knelt beside Old '49 behind the scanty cover afforded by the scrubby bush. "They'll soon smell us out. Let's have the advantage of the surprise and drop. But don't burn powder if it can be avoided."

Now Old '49 recognized the voice, and in his amazement at the bewildering discovery, uttered a slight exclamation that precipitated affairs.

The sound was heard by the black chief, and his gaze instantly fell upon the bush, but before he could replace his knife with a revolver, Easy Elbert arose in the clear moonlight, a revolver in each hand—one that Wild Kate had cast from her when she fled so precipitately from the dandy sport—and crying out:

"We've got the drop on you, gentlemen! Make a move toward raising a weapon, and the band will begin to play!"

Recognition was instantaneous, and the cool nerve which the dandy sport had that day displayed in Purgatory, now stood him in good stead.

Two men against nine—but those twain with cocked and leveled revolvers—the nine with pistols in belt and right hands holding knives; not such long odds, after all.

"We hold a full hand of trumps, gentlemen, as you can see, and we mean to play them for all they are worth if you crowd us," added Easy Elbert, cool and pleasant as though danger was a thousand miles away.

"You've got the lead, and can take the first trick, but the next is ours," boldly retorted the black chief. "Before you raise hammer for a second shot, we'll riddle you like a sieve."

"Possibly. But that won't save *you* a last trip over the range. My first shot will make another eyelet in that lovely head of yours. And I don't suppose you are over-anxious to turn toes up."

"Not overly," responded the chief, with a grim laugh.

The situation was a complete dead-lock. The first shot fired would almost surely be the signal for the death of at least one-half the whole number engaged. The two men could not give way. Any concession must come from the opposing party, and they all realized this.

Old '49 said not a word. He had firmly believed that the black chief and Easy Elbert were one and the same person—Ethebert Graindorge, the criminal whom he had sworn to hound to the gallows. And now—Easy Elbert stood beside him, risking his life in behalf of his bitterest enemy—while yonder stood the man who had buried him alive!

It was a puzzle that made his brain whirl.

"Look here," abruptly added the black chief, "Suppose we compromise. Of course we can rub you two out, if we make up our minds to do it, but just as certainly you can make it mighty hot for us for a few moments."

"Spoken like an oracle!" laughed Easy Elbert. "Go on, please."

"I don't care so much for your threat of killing me. It looks as though you had a dead-sure thing on me, but then I have rubbed through still narrower holes, and count myself good for a square meal yet. But in a situation like this, I am not the only one who has a say-so."

"You mean my partner and self—exactly," commented Easy Elbert, in a still easier tone.

"Not exactly, I mean my boys here. If I say the word, at you they go, tooth and toenail, no matter who falls by the wayside—and that one or two, possibly more, *would* fall, I have not the slightest doubt."

"Your perception does you credit, Sir Black-head," sneered the dandy sport. "Suppose you come to the point?"

"Anything to please the children. Lads, how is it? Charge or retreat? Smell powder or take water?"

"Ef they'll let us go, I'm fer lettin' *them* go," bluntly responded one of the black riders, and that he expressed the sincere wishes of his comrades, their general nod evidenced.

"You hear?" quietly said the chief, "what is your answer?"

"Accepted—on conditions," was the prompt response. "You each one of you swear that you will not attempt to surprise us, or take us in ambush after you are out of this trap?"

"I will answer for myself, and if my orders are worth anything, none of my men will trouble you again," quickly uttered the chief. "On your part swear—"

"I am imposing conditions, not *you*. Accept or decline."

"Accepted, then. But if you pull trigger when our backs are turned, we'll kill you or try it while one of us can move hand or foot! Back to the horses, boys, and mount. I'll cover you until you're in the saddle."

Eagerly enough the black riders obeyed, and then their chief turned to follow them. The two men kept close guard, but there was no sign of treachery. The enemy seemed only too well satisfied at escaping so easily, and rode rapidly away down the narrow pass.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TABLES TURNED.

EASY ELBERT and Old '49 followed along the ledge until a point was reached where they could retreat back among the hills where horsemen could not follow them, in case the black riders should attempt to play them false when fairly out of the trap. But steadily on the fellows rode until hidden from sight by the winding of the pass.

"Well, my dear sir," said the dandy sport, sitting down on a convenient spur of rock and looking half-quizzically, half-soberly into the face of his companion. "How do you like the situation? I don't see how we could have done any better, for if we had them foul, their grip on us was quite as certain, if they had only thought so."

There was no immediate reply. Ever since his rescue, by the dandy sport from what seemed an inevitable death, Old '49 had acted like one in a dream. All at once he seemed to wake up—the dazed, bewildered expression left his face, and his eyes began to glow with a dangerous light as he moved close to Easy Elbert, turning the face of the dandy sport so that the light of the moon fell fairly upon it.

Kaen was his gaze, but unflinchingly was it met. A smile of mingled amusement and mockery curled that pointed mustache.

"Are you man or are you devil?" fiercely demanded Old '49, his gripe growing tighter as he saw that smile and read its meaning aright. "Are you Ethelbert Graindorge, or is that man—the chief of those black riders?"

"My dear sir, will you please to remember that it is *my* shoulder you are manipulating?—thanks," and Easy Elbert rubbed the spot where the fingers of his strange companion had nearly met in the flesh. "As for your first question, I believe I am a man, though there may be a spice of the devil in my composition—some people have been ready to swear there is. Regarding your other query: can't you decide that for yourself? How can I throw any more light on the subject?"

"See here," slowly uttered the veteran, his tones and face showing that he was regaining his self-control, though the red glow was deepened in his eyes. "You 'member what I told you 'bout my bein' tuck pris'ner an' buried alive?"

Easy Elbert nodded, gazing around them almost indifferently.

"I knowed then that the head one o' them devils was Ethelbert Graindorge. Then I saw you, an' I knowed *you* was the man. Ag'in to-night I was tuck captive—by *him*. You sot me free. But see here. You've played me fer a fool long aplenty. You worked it mighty slick, but I reckon I kin see bottom at last. You two men is one an' the same person!"

No more indifference now, real or affected. For once in his life Easy Elbert was completely taken aback. He stared at the hard face which confronted him, amazement written in every feature, and his voice was hard and sharp as he demanded:

"What the devil do you mean? How can that be?"

"Easy enough when you come to look at it from both sides, with eyes all open," was the prompt response, and for the first time Easy Elbert saw that Old '49 still held his pistol, cocked and ready for instant use.

This, more than aught else, restored his customary coolness. Despite the measured manner in which the veteran spoke, the dandy sport felt that he was confronting a madman—that the slightest loss of nerve on his part might be fatal, by confirming Old '49 in his suspicions.

"Suppose you explain, my dear sir," he said, with a lazy yawn. "It would hardly be prudent to follow those sable rascals too closely, and I'd just as soon pass the time listening to your idle fancies, as the howling of those prowling wolves."

"You heard that I was huntin' you down—for a year, now, I hev bin lookin' fer you 'mong the mines, an' of course I hed to put a good many questions to all sorts o' men. Some of 'em told you, or sent you word that I was closin' in on the right scent at last. You laid a trap fer me, an' I walked right into it. You tried to kill me, an' at the same time wipe all trace o' me off o' the face o' the airth. But my time wasn't come yit, an' I scraped through."

"When we met in Purgatory, my face was hid an' yours onkivered. Afore you recognized me, I knowed *you*, an' more—I found out what a big stake you was playin' for, when Wild

Kate passed us in the street. Man-devil! ef you knowed who she really is, you'd take p'izen sooner then think o' winnin' *her* love—"

"I do know," quietly interposed Easy Elbert. "She told me only this evening. Her real name is Mrs. David Arbuckle—"

"The widder o' the man you murdered—"

"Of the man you *think* I murdered. Please make no wild assertions," coolly corrected the dandy sport.

"My comin' in spiled your plans," pursued Old '49, more composedly, though this was wholly on the surface, as his companion readily saw.

"You made a bold stroke, then. You called in your men, an' 'tacted the Silver mine to kill the old man and kerry off the gals; but I fooled ye ag'in, though you ketched me while I was doin' of it. You brung me here, an' made out you was goin' to kill me. I reckon you did 'low to send me over the range, only fer what I said 'bout another bloodhound as 'd take the trail whar I was choked off. You knowed me, an' you couldn't guard ag'inst *him*. Then you tried to throw dust in my eyes. You made like you wanted to tortur' me fust. You puttered along until the cloud hid the moon. Then you shed your black duds, cut me loose, an' clum the rocks. One o' the gang played your part—"

A long whistle of what seemed genuine amazement from the lips of Easy Elbert cut his speech short.

"And you believe all that?" exclaimed the dandy sport, his blue eyes widely distended. "No wonder you asked me whether I was man or devil—"

"It could be done jist as I said," doggedly retorted the veteran. "I don't say it *did*, fer sure. But when I was with *him*, I felt sure he was Ethelbert Graindorge. When I saw your face, I knowed *you* was Ethelbert Graindorge. An' then, when it seemed like you was both come afore me at the same time, I racked my brain to cipher out how it could all be, an' I did it! Mind, I ain't dead sure of it yit. Ef I was, I wouldn't be talkin' now, but you'd be on the road to the gallows quick as I could tote ye thar!"

"Of course I would yield meekly, without a struggle," laughed the dandy sport, adding in a more serious tone: "But supposing you were correct, why should I set you free, when you have so often declared your purpose of hounding me to the gallows for some horrible crime? Why not make sure work, and have one bitter enemy less?"

"Mebbe bec'ase of what I said 'bout the man as was ready to take my place. Mebbe bec'ase of the botch-work you made back thar at the Silver Brick. Mebbe you 'lowed I'd give over thinkin' you was my game, but anyway that I could sw'ar you wasn't mixed up in the fuss, when it was tuck up in airnest, as it's bound to be."

"A rich variety to choose from, truly," laughed the dandy sport. "Suppose I swear that not one of them has a foundation on fact? Suppose I pledge you my word of honor as a gentleman, that I never buried you alive—that I never led the attack on the Silver Brick mine—that I never wore a black rig of that sort—in short, that I am simply and exactly what I appear, Elbert Gray, oftener called Easy Elbert, and not Ethelbert Graindorge nor Ethelbert-anybody-else?"

"A man that dares murder, ain't likely to choke on a lie."

"That's enough," said Easy Elbert, his voice hard and cold. "I will neither admit nor deny being the man you think. You were of service to me to-day. I canceled that debt by saving your life to-night. We are quits, now. Pursue your hobby, if you will, but the moment you cross my path in such a manner as to annoy or inconvenience me, look to yourself. I will strike—and when I *do* strike, something or somebody is pretty apt to tumble!"

"I don't ax no odds," was the calm response. "I won't trouble ye until I'm shore—then ef you kin strike a quicker or shorer lick than I kin, it's my loss."

"Good enough! Let the subject drop for the present, or we both may get hot over it, and I can't afford to start another quarrel while I have one already on my hands."

"Them bull-thumpers, you mean? You 'low to fight 'em?"

"Unless they take water—which I don't believe they're partial to, either literally or metaphorically—I will fight them, and kill at least one of the squad: Sandy McGill."

"Not ef I kin help it, you won't—fight 'em all three, I mean!" said Old '49, with dogged emphasis. "Nobody's got any right to your hide until after my claim is paid."

Easy Elbert laughed shortly, but his voice was full of earnestness as he responded:

"If you are a wise man, my dear sir, you will not be too fresh. So long as your ridiculous fancies do not seriously interfere with my movements, all right: it amuses you, and don't hurt me; but the moment you cross that line, you'll get hurt, I say it in all friendliness."

Old '49 made no reply. For a brief space there was silence between the two men whose relations toward each other were so curious. Then Easy Elbert spoke again:

"We have given those fellows law enough. Are you going back to town?"

"Ef *you* be, yes. My trail's the same as yours, whichever way you take," was the quick response.

"You should be best acquainted with the lay of the ground—lead the way. No remarks, if you please," the dandy sport added, peremptorily. "I prefer not to give you any excuse for reviving your stale charges, which you would surely do were I to lead the way, and we run into an ambush."

"You think, then—"

"More than that; I am certain of it," interposed the dandy sport, positively. "They would be asses not to lay an ambush for us, for with outlaws and criminals such as they undoubtedly are, pledges at the pistol-muzzle, such as they gave, go for nothing. They know that you can and will give them trouble if you ever reach Purgatory alive."

Old '49 paused to consider for a brief space, then struck off through the rocky hills, followed by Easy Elbert without remark.

It is unnecessary to follow them step by step. Enough that Old '49 chose a course, long and roundabout, but such that lessened the chances of being ambuscaded by horsemen.

They finally drew near to Purgatory, and feeling that there was little danger to be feared from even such a daring rascal as the chief of the black riders had shown himself, so close to the town, the two men hastened along the road with considerable more carelessness than they had heretofore displayed.

But they had a cunning and unscrupulous enemy to deal with. The chief of the black riders had shown his good sense in breaking the dead-lock by releasing his grasp—he showed no less in riding straight for Purgatory rather than trying to waylay the two men at some point nearer the spot where they had parted.

"They mustn't get back to town," he said, when his plans had all been shaped in his busy brain. "Not that we have so much cause to dread the sport who calls himself Easy Elbert, for he is one of our own kidney, but that other rascal will make us trouble unless we stop his tongue. Our only chance is in striking them close to town. They will keep a close look-out until then, but will grow careless when they sight the houses."

"There's only two trails for them to choose from, unless they go a dozen miles out of the way to come in at the lower end of town. If they should, we can't stop them. If they don't—then they're our meat. Kinzey, you take four men and guard the upper trail. I'll look after the other. Mind, no shooting unless all else fails. Take them prisoners if they come your way, and fetch them to me. If you *have* to shoot, make sure work of the old man, and then pull out lively, for the town will be roused out."

After a few more instructions, the black riders divided and formed their ambushes. And, as fortune would have it, Old '49 chose the trail beside which the black chief and his three best men were in hiding.

They were seen while still some little distance off, and the black chief had ample time to whisper:

"We can take them without firing a shot. A quick leap out and use your clubbed pistols. If any powder must be burnt, leave that to me. Ready, now—when I give the word!"

But cunningly as the plan was laid, it seemed fated to miscarry. The two men were still a score yards away from the point in crossing which they were to spring the ambush, when a pistol exploded among the black riders!

A furious curse burst from the chief at this mishap.

"Out and take 'em!" he shouted, leaping the cover and opening fire.

That first explosion warned the two men of danger. They saw the flash, and believing they were fired at, both leaped for the cover on the further side of the trail. Old '49 reached the shadows just as the black chief fired upon him, but the dandy sport was not so fortunate.

His first swift bound caused one foot to slip on a loose stone, and unable to save himself, he fell headlong. Before he could arise or draw a weapon, two men were upon his back, and his desperate struggles were effectually quieted by a cruel blow on the head with a pistol-butt.

Another furious curse was uttered by the black chief, as he caught a glimpse of Old '49 running swiftly toward town, apparently untouched by the shots which he sent after him. For a few rods he kept up the chase, then desisted, for he saw that it was worse than useless. The alarm would quickly spread through Purgatory, and Old '49 would soon be on their trail with stout backing.

"We must skin out o' this in a hurry, boys!" he snarled, returning to his men and bending over the prostrate form of Easy Elbert. "That old devil will fetch a gang of hot-heads after us. Pity he wasn't the one killed, instead of this chap—"

"He ain't dead, boss," interposed one of the black riders. "I kin feel his heart a-beatin'. Shall I lend him the knife?"

"No—he's one of our own sort. I wouldn't

care much if he had got away—" began the chief, but stopping short at an ugly murmur from his men.

"He has see'd too much—he could make us too much trouble to be turned loose!" muttered the man who spoke before.

"Who said anything about turning him loose?" sharply. "Now we've got him, we'll polish him off— Hal the boys from above are coming over. They heard our shooting. Such a cursed botch—which one of you let off that pistol?"

Until now there had been no time to ask this question, but it came with savage emphasis at last, and the eyes of the black chief glared viciously upon his men as he put it.

There was no answer given just then, for from the dark shadows beyond came a pistol-shot, and with a choking groan of bitter agony, one of the black figures flung up his arms and reeled back, falling stone dead!

CHAPTER XIX.

A NECKTIE FOR EASY ELBERT.

FOR a moment the black riders seemed petrified by this unlooked-for assault, but then, as another report followed the death-shot, the black chief cried out sharply:

"Pick up Dan and make for the horses—"

The dandy sport at that instant uttered a feeble groan, and struggled to arise. The sight awakened all the worst passions of one of the black riders, mate and brother to the rascal who had just been killed, and with a snarling curse he drew his knife and leaped upon the helpless man.

At the same time the black chief darted forward, no doubt with the intention of securing Easy Elbert, and the two men coming in violent contact with each other, both were overturned by the shock. An accident lucky for them, as it proved, for *zip-zip*—a brace of bullets whistled above them as they fell.

The black chief was first upon his feet, and giving vent to a sharp, peculiar whistle, he cried aloud:

"Take that devil in the brush—there's only one. A hundred dollars for his scalp!"

The words were addressed to the five men who came riding from the upper trail, knowing from the sounds that their game had attempted the other passage. The words of their chief were promptly acted upon, the five men charging upon the cover from whence the bold marksman sped his death-missiles, and the chief was not slow to profit by the diversion.

"Take care of Dan, lads," he cried. "I'll look after this fellow. That's his mate playing the band, and if the boys don't rope him in, we'll bag him along the trail!"

The two men picked up their dead comrade, and bearing the body to where the horses were concealed, bound the corpse into the saddle. The black chief dragged the half-senseless sport after him, and hurriedly but securely fastened him upon one of the spare animals.

"Mount, boys!" he exclaimed, with an ugly oath. "That old hound has stirred up a hornets' nest in town, and we'll be lucky if we get clear without a few sharp stings."

Out into the open he dashed, managing his own horse with one hand and that bearing the bound and helpless dandy sport with the other. A single glance showed him that Old '49 was still at liberty, and likely to remain so for all the black riders could accomplish at that point, in the limited time at their disposal.

The shrewd veteran had taken to the rocks where mounted men could not charge him, even at a walk, and was plying the revolver handed him by Easy Elbert right vigorously, quite as much in the hope of summoning aid from town as through any expectation of hitting the enemy, who had left their animals, and taking advantage of every practical cover, were trying to close in with him.

In no other way could they hope to succeed, but the black chief quickly realized that worse than failure awaited them here, for the alarm had spread in Purgatory, and the loud shouts, gathering toward a common center, told him that a force was forming to investigate the matter.

A loud, shrill whistle gave the signal for his men to retreat, an order which they were perfectly willing to obey, despite the blood-money hung up before their eyes. They too had heard and rightly interpreted the growing sounds in Purgatory, and firing a parting shot toward the covert from which had flashed out the last shot fired by Old '49, they hastened back to their horses and mounting, rode rapidly after their fellows.

"The devil and all his imps seem to be working against us to-night!" growled the chief of the black riders, as they galloped rapidly away from the spot where their carefully planned ambush had been so strangely upset. "One-third of our band sent over the range, and what have we to show for it?"

"We got that cuss," growled Borden, the ruffian who had sought to stab Easy Elbert, with a savage glance at the dandy sport. "It'll be some satisfaction to rub him out. Ef he didn't

kill my mate, 'twas his pard done it, an' that's 'bout the same thing."

"Why not cut his heart out an' let him drop, right off?" suggested one of the party, whose wounds smarted just enough to set his worst nature on fire. "Then we kin divide, play the old trick an' git back into town without anybody suspectin' we was mixed up in the a'f'r."

"Silence in the ranks!" sternly cried the leader. "When I think I need your advice, be sure it will be asked. We are followed—follow me close, and perhaps we can make the thing pan out all right in the end."

For half an hour the black band pressed on as rapidly as the nature of the ground would admit, and during that space of time not a word was spoken. Then the black chief reined his horse down to a walk, and lost no time in making known the result of his deep cogitations.

"You all know, as well as I do, that our greatest danger lies in what that old man can tell of us and our doings this night. As for this fellow, whom we have prisoner, he could not point one of us out, were we all to meet him face to face on the street to-morrow. As far as I am concerned, I would be willing to turn him loose on his pledge not to even breathe such suspicions as he may have—wait," he added, sternly, as a murmur arose among his followers. "I said so far as I am concerned, but of course you have a vote in the matter, and if you say kill him, death it is."

"It's the only safe way," muttered Borden, and his words were greeted by a general chorus of approval.

"Very well. The majority rules. Though it is poor policy for hawks to pick out other hawks' eyes, according to my notion. But now to explain why I chose to bring him along a prisoner."

"You saw what he dared to save the life of that old rascal, and you saw, too, that the old man turned and tackled us single-handed instead of running away when his mate fell. I took care that he should learn the truth before I gave the signal for retreat, by riding out in the open, where he could see his mate was a prisoner—not dead. I did this to draw him after us, and have slacked up for a bit to make sure he does not lose our trail."

"Just ahead of us, in the pass, is a lovely spot for an ambush. The way the moon shines, a mouse could not pass through it unseen. The old hound killed your mate, Borden. Pick a man to back you, and both get ready to drop out of the saddle without stopping your horses. We will ride on for a few rods, and there leave your animals for you to pick them up again when your work is done."

"It's settled that he is to be rubbed out?" asked the sanguinary ruffian, nodding toward Easy Elbert.

"Of course. You know where Tom English was hung for knifing his mate? Well, right there this sport will receive the same dose and in exactly the same fashion. When your work is done, you can ride there and satisfy yourselves of the fact, if you care to take the trouble."

"Pick your pard and be ready—we're almost at the spot where you want to take cover."

"Kipperley's my man, if he'll go."

"An' mighty glad to do it, too!" exclaimed a wiry little rascal, clearing his feet from the stirrups.

"Press on just ahead of me," added the chief. "The rest of you spread out and fill the pass. Now!"

The two men dropped to the ground and glided swiftly into the bushes which here lined the base of the rock walls, while the rest of the party rode on at an increased rate, driving the two riderless horses before them until a bend in the defile hid them from the rascals in ambush.

At a sign from their leader, two men swiftly hitched the horses to a spur of rock, and then the party pressed on once more, riding at a rapid trot.

For fully half an hour they followed the pass, then left it by a narrow trail which deviated sharply to the right, leading up the rocky hill, here so steep and difficult that the black riders were forced to dismount and lead their animals, Easy Elbert and the dead man alone remaining in the saddle.

After some ten minutes' difficult climbing, a level plateau was reached, verging upon the pass itself, some few rods further up than the point where the party had left it.

Close to the escarpment grew several goodly-sized trees, and from a stout limb of one of these, hung a frayed end of rope. With a short laugh, the black chief called the attention of the prisoner to this mute evidence of a dreadful tragedy which had taken place not long before.

"You see that bit of halter? A fellow called Tom English killed his partner, and was lynched for the crime. The lariat was made fast to yonder limb, and the noose fitted snugly around his throat as he stood on the edge of the cliff. He was granted time enough for prayer—then a quick shove sent him over the edge—as far as the rope would let him fall. A regular gallows, made by nature!"

Easy Elbert made no reply, for good and sufficient reasons in the shape of a stout gag. But his blue eyes spoke his defiance plainly enough.

"Two of you plant Dan, and be quick about it, or you'll miss the circus. Climb up the tree and tie the lariat."

At that instant the faint but unmistakable sound of firearms came to their ears, and the chief of the black riders laughed aloud with savage exultation.

"There rings out the death of your chum, my dear sir!" he said, pausing in his work of cutting the dandy sport free from the saddle. "He has run his head into the trap I set for him, and his tongue will never tell the tale of this night's work. I don't know much about either of you—what your relations are, other than that either one seemed to jump at the chance of risking life for the other—but it may be a consolation to you to feel that you will not have to go over the range alone. It would be a shame to separate such devoted chums, and so we will give you such a lively send off that you can easily catch up with the ghost of your old friend!"

While he was talking, the dead outlaw was stripped of his black suit, and buried much as his mates had been before him—laid in a hollow and heavy stones rolled upon him.

By the time this was accomplished, the noosed lasso was properly adjusted, and only awaited its human freight.

The black chief pulled Easy Elbert from the saddle, and forced him to walk toward the edge of the pass. Pausing when on the very verge of the dizzy depth, he cut the thong that held the gag in place, but still left the dandy sport's arms bound tightly behind his back.

"If you have any important message to send to either friend or enemy, I will engage to deliver it," he said.

"If you mean what you say—if you are not mocking me," uttered the doomed sport, "there is one message which I would like delivered."

"If it will not endanger our necks, I'll see that it reaches its destination," promptly uttered the chief.

"Let those cowboys know the real reason why I could not keep my engagement with them. No man ever called me a coward in life, and I don't care about bearing the brand after death, through no fault of my own."

"But there's something more, surely?"

"Nothing—only do your work as quickly as possible."

Cold and steady were the tones of the speaker. There was not the slightest shadow of emotion upon his face, even when the greasy noose was slipped over his head. He stood there, proudly defiant—then was hidden in darkness as another dense cloud swept over the face of the moon.

"Say your prayers, Easy Elbert!" rung out the voice of the chief. "We'll not run any chances this time by waiting for the light to come back. Ready, boys—cast him overboard the instant I count ten!"

Steadily, like the measured beats of a healthy pulse, the chief of the black riders counted up to the fatal number. Then—the tree shook violently as the rope straightened out with a sudden *twang*!

Slowly the cloud swept past, and when the light came again, the black band pressed to the verge and peered down.

There against the white face of the cliff hung the body of Easy Elbert, motionless, at the end of the hangman's rope.

CHAPTER XX.

OLD '49 RUNS THE GANTLET.

IT was not the fault of Old '49 that Easy Elbert fell into the power of the black band. No one man could have done more—very few would have dared as much—to rescue a dearly beloved brother from the toils, than the veteran did for the man whom he had sworn to bring to the gallows.

When the ambush was prematurely unmasked, he bade the dandy sport make for cover, setting the example himself, a single glance showing him that Easy Elbert had not been struck by that first shot. He did not hear his companion fall, and it was not until the black chief ceased firing after him that he suspected what had occurred.

Glancing back, he saw that the dandy sport had indeed fallen and was now dead or a prisoner.

His flight ended right there. Instead of hastening to the town, he sunk down under cover and began creeping back toward the spot where he could see the enemy standing near the prostrate figure of Elbert Gray.

"Ef they've killed him, I sw'ar I'll hunt the hull gang clean off o' the face of the airth!" Old '49 grated between his teeth as he drew and cocked his revolver—the one handed him by the dandy sport when he set him free from the torture stake. "Nobody's got the right to tetch him afore my claim is settled—ha!" as the rapid rattle of horses' hoofs broke upon the air. "Thar comes the rest o' the gang. Ef I knowed he wasn't dead—durned ef I don't try it on, anyway!"

A swift forward movement carried the veteran to a point from whence he could fully command the open space beyond, and aided by the clear moonlight he fired the shot that sent big Dan Borden "over the range."

Quick as thought another shot followed, but the man at whom he aimed, saved his life by his start of surprise, and Old '49 wasted two more bullets as the black chief and Zack Borden collided with each other and fell over the prostrate form of the dandy sport.

The reader has been given a sufficiently clear idea of what followed. In obedience to the command of their chief, the five members of the black band who had just ridden up, charged upon Old '49, who retreated from them, taking to the rocks where horsemen could not follow. Sufficient to repeat here that the crafty old fellow not only baffled the enemy, but while keeping his own skin from injury, marked two of his enemy with lead, and by constant firing insured the coming of aid from town.

He saw the black chief ride out into the moonlighted open, leading the horse upon which sat Easy Elbert, a prisoner; he heard the shrill whistle and divined its purport even before he saw the black riders beating a rapid retreat to the spot where they had abandoned their horses.

"He ain't dead, or they wouldn't take the trouble to Kerry him off that-a-way," muttered Old '49, rapidly reloading his revolver from his well supplied cartridge belt. "But it's durned queer they don't jest slip a knife-blade atween his ribs, an' let it go at that—durned queer they should hamper 'emselves with a live pris'ner jest when it looks, from them sounds back town-ways, as though they would hev to run fer it, right smart. Ha! by thunder, I b'lieve that's it!"

Shrewd and keen-witted, Old '49 actually hit upon the very reason given by the chief of the black riders for his carrying the dandy sport away alive, rather than end all trouble by leaving him dead on the field.

"Tain't him they keer about so much as me," mused the veteran, with a short, grim chuckle, as he drew his belt tighter and prepared himself for a long and hard run, if it should become necessary. "They count on my follerin' 'em in hopes o' gittin' the dandy sport away—an' so I will!"

From the town came the warlike sounds, growing louder and more distinct, but Old '49 did not wait for that cautious approach. If he was correct in his surmise, that Easy Elbert had been exhibited alive as a lure to draw him on, he must not suffer the enemy to gain too great a distance on him, if he expected to discover the trap before it was sprung upon him.

"They'll take the shortest an' easiest way, 'cause that'll be the surest fire, too," he mused, while running swiftly along the trail taken by the black riders. "They'll hide a couple or three men 'long the track whar nobody kin pass without givin' 'em a chainece fer a broadside—but they won't dare set the trap right away, while them critters is hellerberlooin' back yender. Stretch your trotters, old man! Fust thing is to git cluss enough to hear thar hosses' hoofs, ef not see the critters themselves. Then let 'em fool this chicken ef they kin!"

It was a desperate risk, such as but very few men would have dared to incur, single-handed, and Old '49 fully realized its nature. But the thick crowding surprises—the strange mystifications with which he had been pelted that night—the knowledge that before him were two men, either of whom, if met singly, he could conscientiously swear was Ethelbert Graindorge—had fairly unsettled his brain, and for the time being he was little better than a madman. He hardly gave a second thought to the personal risk he was running. He only felt that he must rescue this man who called himself Easy Elbert—that he must not die until that tormenting question, was he, or was he not Ethelbert Graindorge? was settled forever, beyond the faintest doubt.

Running free and easily in his moccasins, Old '49 made scarcely any noise himself, and with his quick hearing intensified by the deep interest he took in the matter, he soon came within ear-shot of the enemy, and taking advantage of a cloud passing athwart the face of the moon, he raced on with increased speed, only slackening his pace and crouching down behind a scrubby bush when the bright light returned.

Scarce two score yards in advance rode the party, and he quickly counted them twice over, that there might be no error.

"Eight men livin' of the gang—one dead critter an' the pris'ner—nine hosses," he summed up. "Now let 'em fool me ef they kin! Do your durndest, ye p'izen imps o' Satan! Thar's a bloodhound on your trail as you won't shake off or git shet on in a hurry—you hear me bark!"

Suffering the black band to place a hundred yards between themselves and him, Old '49, stooping low, and holding himself in readiness to dodge behind the nearest cover, should the necessity for such action arise, followed after them.

Without any very great effort he managed to keep at about the same distance from them.

If, at times, the horsemen gained a little upon him, an extra spurt where the nature of the ground favored him, or one of the many clouds obscured the light of the moon for a few moments, would regain the lost advantage.

Time and again the spy counted the black figures, feeling certain that a trick was intended. If not, there would have been more backward glances, more caution shown by the enemy, some effort made to foil the pursuit which they must know was among the probabilities.

"They're too durned easy—'tain't nat'ral!" muttered the long-headed scout. "They 'low to fool whoever is on their track, an' right ahead is the spot fer 'em to try it on, too!"

Firmly believing he had rightly divined their purpose, and feeling that the critical moment was near at hand, Old '49 crept still nearer the enemy as they entered the high walled pass. They were riding at a footpace, now, and the veteran could just distinguish the faint murmur of human voices above the trampling of horses' hoofs.

As the reader is aware, the black chief, convinced that the man whose tongue could endanger their lives, was following them, slackened his pace so that the echo of their horses' hoofs would guide their intended victim along the right trail, having no idea that Old '49 had been able, even if willing, to keep so close upon their heels. Still less did he suspect what was even then transpiring.

Taking advantage of the darkness caused by a transient cloud, Old '49 pressed forward until he could distinctly catch every word spoken by the chief of the black riders. And then, warned by the silvering edge of the cloud, the old man crouched down behind a gray rock which the action of frost had loosened from the face of the cliff.

"They hain't dropped off yit, but they will afore long," he muttered as the light returned and he could count the party. "Ef I only knowed whar that feller was hung they spoke about—or ef thar was any way o' climbin' out o' this an' makin' a circumbendibus—but thar ain't! 'Twould take too long to turn back an' go 'round, even ef I knowed the lay o' the ground—which I don't. Thar's only two things. One to drop the matter, an' let 'em hang the sport. The other to run the gantlet, an' take bigger chainences beyond—which is what I'm goin' to do."

It was a desperate resolution, as no one knew better than the veteran himself. The savage readiness with which Zack Borden accepted the duty assigned him, told plainly enough that he would spare no pains to make the ambush certain in its working.

Waiting until the horsemen had gained a safe distance, Old '49 crept forward, still keeping them in view, and a grim smile curled his lip as he saw two horsemen pressing ahead of the chief and his prisoner. A moment later his view was cut off by the party spreading out in double line, but he had seen enough. The ambush was being laid.

"Done slick enough, but you was foolish to let the old man git so close," he muttered, sinking down behind a bush. "Ef it wasn't fer bringin' the hull gang onto my back, I could soon roust them critters out o' kiver, by s'archin' 'em bushes with a few blue pills. As it is, let 'em ride on a bit. Then, ef a big cloud comes, mebber I kin run the gantlet, an' them cusses never know I've bin in the neighborhood."

Coolly as though assured there was not an enemy within a day's ride, Old '49 peered out from his cover and noted every object within eye-range. Then, when a small cloud obscured the moon for a few moments, he crept on to another bush growing only a few rods from the point where he felt assured his enemies were lying in wait for him.

Then, as he peered forth once more, a fierce curse rose up in his throat, for he made a most unpleasant discovery.

Crossing the white rock which formed the bed of the pass at this point, was a narrow, dark line, not unlike the body of a dead serpent stretched out straight, with head concealed in the bushes on one side of the narrow opening and trail hidden on the other.

"'Twasn't thar when I looked last, but it's meanin' is plain enough. They ain't such durn fools as I thought. They reckoned thar was a chainece o' my smellin' a rat, an', ef so, that I'd try to slip past in the dark. They've run a lariat across, an' when a cloud comes, 'll raise it so's to trip a feller up ef he tries to slip past. Durn the luck!" and with difficulty he bit the fierce oath short off. "Ef a body could only know how they'll hold it—high or low—so's to duck under or jump over—but thar it is!"

With redly glowing eyes, Old '49 glared out from his cover. He was resolved to pass the ambush, and that without much delay. Each moment was bearing the man he desired to rescue, further away from him—nearer to his death.

"It's got to be done, an' that in a hurry—but how? It must be sure work. Ef I don't kill 'em both, they'll send up a signal that'll put thar mates on guard. Double durn the rope! Thar comes a cloud now, big a-plenty fer me to

slip by, only fer that—mebbe I kin do it anyhow!"

As the darkness came, Old '49 left his cover and crawled down along the pass, keeping near the center where there were no obstacles to encounter and betray his progress. On until he felt that he must be near the spot where the rope crossed—when he planted one hand upon a layer of dry leaves and small twigs which the cunning rascals had scattered there, to guard against just such an attempt as was then being made.

The noise was not loud, but Old '49 knew that he had betrayed himself, and leaped swiftly to one side, drawing his revolver as he did so.

It was a purely instinctive movement, but fortune favored him far beyond his expectations. The two men heard the rustling, and knowing that an enemy alone could have produced it, leaped out to slay the spy.

Borden struck against Old '49's crouching form and fell headlong at the very feet of Kipperley, who instantly grappled him, snarling as he vigorously plied his knife:

"I got him—quick, Zack!"

Old '49 instantly took in the situation, and guided by the sounds, fired one shot, following it with a second and a third in swift succession, his aim guided by the bright flash of his own weapon.

By the last flash, Old '49 saw one of the dark forms tear away from the other with a horrible cry, then leap toward him. Dodging swiftly aside, the veteran crouched down. A heavy fall, then all was still.

Slowly the light came back, and Old '49 saw that his work was done. Zack Borden lay with a bullet through his brain, and a dozen knife wounds in his broad back, while Kipperley lay in a pool of blood which had gushed from two holes in his side.

"Looks kinder rough," muttered Old '49, satisfying himself that both were past doing honest men any further harm, and selecting a couple of the best revolvers with suitable ammunition, "but it's jest what they laid out for me. One or t'other had to turn toes up afore I could pass by, and fate marked them as the ones to make the trip over the range."

He rapidly slipped off the cowl, caped coat, trousers and gauntlets which formed the uniform of the black band, from Kipperley, as being nearest his size, and put them on over his own clothes.

"Ef I kin ketch 'em up, they won't think but what I'm the 'centical coon I look to be," he muttered, with a low laugh as he finished dressing and started along the pass. "T'other one got rubbed out afore we could kill the spy. I chucked 'em both into the brush ontill we could come back. 'Twon't be hard to Kerry out the story, an' onder this kiver, I kin help him out—I will, or go onder tryin' it on!"

A few rods further on Old '49 discovered the two horses, and unfastening them, he mounted one, leading the other, riding on at a rapid pace, fearful of being too late to rescue Easy Elbert from death.

There was no longer any necessity of much caution—indeed, he counted on the clatter of his horse's iron-clad hoofs being heard by the outlaws, whose curiosity to learn the outcome of the ambushade would probably cause them to delay the hanging—but he was doomed to disappointment.

He was eagerly looking out for some signs of the black riders, when his gaze rested on a group of men standing upon the very verge of the canyon wall. Even at that distance he could recognize the dandy sport, and though the rope was invisible, he knew that it was about his neck. Then—all was blotted out as a cloud passed over the face of the moon.

Old '49 sat in the saddle, as though suddenly turned to stone. For the time being he was literally paralyzed. An age it seemed before the moon once more shone forth.

The black riders still stood there, but Easy Elbert dangled at the end of the rope against the white face of the rocky wall!

CHAPTER XXI.

WHO WAS IT?

OLD '49 sat in the saddle like one instantly petrified, gazing in motionless, speechless horror on that ugly black blotch against the face of the cliff.

It was not the sight of death that so unmanned him, nor yet the brutal manner in which the deed had been accomplished. Almost daily for long years he had repeated his vow of bringing Ethelbert Graindorge to the gallows, so it could not be the hanging itself that shocked him to his very center.

It was because Easy Elbert, whom he firmly believed to be Ethelbert Graindorge, had died the death of an honest man in being hung by this ruffianly gang—he died without confession, without being publicly disgraced!

Stupidly he sat and watched the hanging body—watched the black riders as they pressed to the very verge of the dizzy height and gazed downward at their victim—watched them turn away and mount their horses, then disappear from sight.

He cared little whither they went now. They

had no further attraction for him. All he could do was to watch that ghastly object up yonder—Merciful heavens!

A gasping, choking cry rattled in the old man's parched throat. His eyes protruded until it seemed as though they must drop from their sockets. He trembled in every fiber, so violently that his teeth chattered together like castanets. And even the horses seemed infected by his amazement, snorting and shuffling backward uneasily.

From hanging motionless, a hideous black blotch against the moonlighted face of the canyon wall, the body of Easy Elbert suddenly seemed endowed with life and motion! His arms were extended, then his fingers seemed to close upon the rope above his head—and then his body moved slowly upward, inch by inch, yet plainly perceptible to the strained vision of the awe-filled watcher below.

What strange mystery was this? Another miracle? Was this being indeed something more than the ordinary mortal whose shape he wore? Was his life charmed, as so many wild men were ever ready to swear—was he a devil, a doubly-favored son of Satan?

Inspired by something not far akin from terror, Old '49 wrenched his horse's head around, to flee from the spot, when he saw the black band ride out to the edge of the cliff and dismount from their horses.

Instantly his wits returned to him with a sense of the personal danger which threatened him, and he rode quickly in against the face of the rock, then slipped down behind his horse and drew his revolver.

If the black band had discovered him, or if they should pass up the canyon instead of down, Old '49 knew that only swift and desperate fighting could save his life.

Standing behind his living barricade, he could hear the enemy descending the steep path.

"Ef they'd spotted me, they'd come afoot an' quiet," he muttered as he detected the sound of human voices amid the noise of slipping hoofs and clattering of dislodged stones. "They're goin' back to see how nice them two cusses polished me off, I reckon!"

Old '49 was correct in this surmise. The black band on reaching the bottom of the pass, mounted and rode away in the direction opposite to that where the veteran stood in wary waiting.

Hardly waiting until the echoes of their hoof-strokes had died away, Old '49 stepped out from the wall and glanced back to where Easy Elbert had been suspended. He was still visible, though now near the escarpment, seemingly resting, for while the veteran watched, there was no motion perceptible.

"Devil or not, I'm going to see what it all means!" the old man muttered, his face grim and hard-set. "It may be just another cunnin' trick like they played onto me over yender—mebbe they didn't hang him at all—mebbe it was only a stuffed figger—mebbe—the devil is in it ef I can't puzzle it out, somehow!"

Fastening one horse behind the other, Old '49 moved on to where the black riders had descended, and scaled the canyon wall without any serious trouble.

Hitching the animals at some little distance from the trail, in secure cover, where they could be reached and mounted should the black band return on discovering how signally their ambushade had failed, Old '49 stole rapidly toward the clump of trees which marked the spot where the dandy sport had been hung.

Despite the suspicions he entertained, Old '49 was too greatly excited to observe much caution, and his first warning of danger came in the shape of a stone which whizzed uncomfortably close to his head.

"Keep back, curse you!" cried a voice which he instantly recognized, followed by another stone which glanced from the rock behind which he leaped. "Keep back—I'll knock your brains out as I would those of a mad-dog!"

"Spell able fust, won't ye?" laughed the veteran, his revolver clicking sharply as he raised the hammer. "Pears to me you sling dornicks 'round mighty lively fer a dead man that's jist be'n hanged—an' your voice sounds purty healthy fer a ghost, too!"

"Old '49—thank God!" gasped the dandy sport, staggering out into the clear moonlight. "I thought it was one of those demons come back to make sure their work was well done! I was unarmed—too terribly shaken to escape by flight—but I meant to die rather than be taken alive!"

He sunk down upon the ground, like one completely exhausted. His face was white and ghastly as that of a corpse, save where a little streak or two of blood had dried upon the skin.

Old '49 arose from his covert and advanced, but holding his revolver ready for instant use. Easy Elbert saw this, and a faint smile came into his face.

"You still suspect me? Well," he added, with something of that old, reckless, careless ring in his laugh, "you will never get a better chance. Shoot—kill me now when I am not able to ward off the blow or strike one in return. Bring your long trail to an end. Yonder lies a rope, ready prepared. Put the noose

around my throat, and push me overboard. Are you not hangman enough for that?"

"Swear that you're Ethelbert Graindorge, an' I'll do it!" exclaimed the human bloodhound, his eyes glowing redly.

"And swear to a lie, with my latest breath? No, thank you!" and the voice of Easy Elbert grew more natural. "I am sick of hearing you keep harping on that one string. Once for all, I tell you that I am *not* the man you take me for."

"Mebbe not—mebbe I'm a blind old fool—mebbe I've bin follerin' the wrong trail all along," slowly responded the veteran, "an' when I diskiver my mistake, I'll ax your pardin an' make what amends I kin fer the wrong I done you. But ontel I hev better evidence than your lone word, I'll stick to the trail I'm on. An' it'll take a smarter trick than this 'ere mock hangin'-bee to throw me off the scent, too!"

Easy Elbert smiled grimly at the old man's obstinacy.

"So you think it was all a farce, concocted for your particular delectation, do you?" he asked, curiously.

"Ef men like them black critters meant pure business, would they hang you so keerfully that not a sign kin be seen on your white skin?" retorted Old '49.

The smile fled from the dandy sport's face, and his voice was sober enough as he spoke:

"As heaven hears my words, old man, I can no more solve the mystery than you can. When they fitted that rope about my neck, and stood me on the edge of the precipice yonder, I bade adieu to life, for I firmly believed that my time to die had come at last."

"But you *didn't* die—an' die you would ef the rope had hugged your thrapple all the time I saw you danglin' over thar," obstinately exclaimed Old '49.

"My arms were bound behind me, and the noose was about my neck when that cloud shut out the light of the moon. Then, I felt a knife cut my bonds—felt the noose slipped down over my shoulders and drawn tight about my body, close under my arms. And at the same time a voice whispered softly in my ear—I can hear every word now, as distinctly as I did then—whispered: '*Grasp the slack of the rope as it hangs before you, and thus break the shock. As you value your life, turn your face to the rock and hang as though dead, before the light comes back!*'"

"Like one in a dream, I obeyed. That man counted ten, and I was thrust over the edge. The shock was terrible, though I broke its force as much as I could with my naked hands—see!" and he showed his palms, bleeding and blistered. "It seemed as though the rope was cutting my body in twain. Still, I managed to turn face to the rock, and bending my head to one side, grasp the rope in my teeth, so that, to those looking down on me from above, the noose appeared to be about my neck. And so I hung until I heard them mount their horses and ride away. Then I managed to draw myself up here and cast off the noose. I saw you coming—saw your black garb—and believed one of the gang had come back to make sure I was dead."

"A mighty queer a'fa'r—mighty queer!" commented the veteran, but with something in his tones that told Easy Elbert he was not yet wholly converted. "You don't know which one o' the critters did you that service? It was the head devil, wasn't it? The man whose eyes an' size an' voice all looks an' sounds so mighty like youn?"

"If it *was* him, he altered his voice completely. No, I can throw no further light on the subject. It all occurred precisely as I have told you. Believe me or not, what matter? I do not care for your friendship, and I value your enmity still less," wearily added Easy Elbert. "The fust you'll never git, only by way o' keepin' you ag'inst other inemies, to save you fer my revenge!" The other, mebbe you'll rate it higher then you do now, afore the end comes. This much you mought as well b'ar in mind, and so save yourself the trouble o' hatchin' up any more o' these durned fool tricks. I'm sure you're the man I'm lookin' fer, an' I never 'll change my pinion ontel I see you standin' by while Ethelbert Graindorge is hangin' dead from the gallows!"

"You think that I arranged all this? That I had myself hung—bah man, you are crazy!"

"Crazy or no, you can't talk the notion out o' my brains," was the dogged reply. "You an' that head imp o' the devil's gang is one an' the same pusson! You played them two tricks jist to throw me off the trail long enough so you, as Easy Elbert, could git in your pritty work with Kate Wilder, as she calls herself now—the widdler o' David Arbuckle, the man you killed fer the 'surance money!"

"Stick to your belief if you will—I'll make no further effort to disabuse your cracked brain. But who are you? Why do you take such a deep interest in this affair?"

"Who air I?" deliberately uttered the old man. "Old '49—one o' the Argonauts which went fer the Golden Fleece in Californy—an' got fleeced, too! Harry-Cane was my daddy,

Cy-Clone my twin brother! Ef you want the rest o' my pedigree, don't be anyways bashful—"

"Thanks!" laughed Easy Elbert, now more like his old self. "My curiosity is entirely satisfied. And now—since I see you are otherwise armed, please return the pistol I loaned you over yonder. Again, thanks!" he said, as the veteran immediately complied with his request. "It is barely possible that I may run across some of our black-robed friends on my way to town, and they have robbed me of my other weapons."

"Thar's a boss over yender, ef you'd ruther ride," said Old '49. "They left 'em fer the two fellers they putt onder kiver to interview me, an' as I come through, I brung 'em along with me."

"I heard pistol-shots, just before they hung me. You had a fight, then?" asked Easy Elbert, with a show of interest.

"Some men might call it so—yas," was the quiet answer.

"Ther'll be a heavy score marked up against you for this night's work, old man," said the dandy sport, seriously. "That class of men don't forget easily. I don't want to seem officious, but if you will take well meant advice, you'll place a good many miles between yourself and Purgatory before you stop for good."

"Here's the hosses—take your choice. Now, which way mought you be goin' to steer?"

"To Purgatory, straight as the country will let me, of course. You know I have an engagement for three o'clock to-day."

"You've answered the question you axed me, then," was the quiet comment. "Ef you turn tail on Purgatory, so will I. Ef you go thar, I mean to go too. I've hunted you too long to lose sight o' ye now, afore the doubt is fairly settled."

"Of course you will do as you please, but I warn you that you are going to your death. Those men will kill you on sight, to keep your tongue still. They know you, while you have not seen a single one of their faces. Better take my advice, and fight shy of Purgatory—"

"Will you lead, or shell I?" sharply interposed Old '49.

"Lead on—and better luck to your guidance than befell us the last time," said Easy Elbert, all traces of concern vanishing from his tones as he saw that nothing he could say would move the obstinate old fellow from his resolve.

Old '49 took the lead, avoiding the canyon, as it was not likely that the black riders would pass by the death of the comrades they had left in ambush, without an effort to avenge them.

It was a long and hard ride, and daylight was dawning when the little town of Purgatory was sighted. Here Easy Elbert dismounted and turned his horse loose, saying:

"I will walk the rest of the way, and unless you wish to attract unpleasant attention, you had better doff that disguise and follow my example. I will be at my hotel until the hour set for my meeting those cowboys. Good luck to you!"

There was no reply, and the dandy sport walked briskly into town and entered the Occidental Hotel without meeting a living soul. He paused in the office only long enough to instruct the landlord not to have him called before noon, then hastened up to his room.

The door was locked, just as he had left it, but upon the little table lay a folded note, addressed to Elbert Gray. With a frown of annoyance, he tore it open, and saw that it was in the same hand-writing as the former missive he had received after the same mysterious manner. Its contents were short and to the point, running as follows:

"MR. ELBERT GRAY, alias EASY ELBERT:—If you return to this room, and delay your departure for an hour, your doom is irretrievably sealed. You will be arrested for murder, and the evidence collected against you is sufficient to hang an angel fresh from heaven!"

There was no signature appended—no clew to indicate the author. It spoke earnestly, but Easy Elbert flung it aside with a short, careless laugh, muttering:

"Another trick to frighten me away—but it won't work. I am going to have one more good, sound sleep, anyway!" and five minutes later he was enjoying it, too!

CHAPTER XXII.

EASY ELBERT GIVES HIS PAROLE.

A QUICK, sharp rapping at the door awakened Easy Elbert, though his first glance at the sunshine which streamed in at his window told him that it was not yet noon. He lay still for a moment, thinking that the summons was for some other belated boarder, but once more the sharp rat-tat-too echoed through his chamber, and with a trace of anger in his tones he demanded:

"What's wanting? I left word that I was not to be called before noon. Is that you, Quigley?" calling the landlord by name, speaking in a drowsy, half-asleep manner, but looking and acting in a totally different manner.

Like a flash came back the memory of that strangely received note of warning which he had tossed aside so contemptuously, and instantly his every sense was on the full alert. Even

as he spoke, he slipped out of bed and put on his trousers, then sat down on the edge of the bed, a revolver in either hand as he listened for the answer.

It came after a brief pause, and in the landlord's voice.

"Yes, it's me. I had to come—he wouldn't take no for an answer. Something of the greatest importance, he says."

"Hallo! ain't you gone yet?" drawled the dandy sport, muffling his voice with his hand until it seemed to come from the depths of the bed. "Get out, Quigley! I'll have to kick you down-stairs, Quigley, if you—ah—" and the sleepy voice died away in a long yawn.

"Stand aside and I'll kick the door in!" Easy Elbert could just distinguish, muttered in a different voice, and he silently raised his weapons, thumbs on the hammers.

"No—don't!" hurriedly spluttered the landlord. "The noise 'll rouse him up, and he's double-distilled lightning on the shoot! I'll call him again— Mr. Gray, I say!"

"Confound you! come in, then, if you won't go away!"

"The door is locked—"

"Kick it down, then. Or go get your pass-key—anything—nothing—but stop your infernal racket! I'll hunt another hotel as soon as I get my nap out. A fellow might as well try to sleep—in a—boiler—facto—ah—"

"Why the devil didn't you fetch the key with you?" the dandy sport heard that deep voice say angrily. "Go get it—and if you're gone ten seconds, I'll bust that door wide open!"

He heard the landlord shuffle away and run down-stairs.

Silently arising, he bunched the blankets in the middle of the bed so that a brief glance would convey the idea that he was lying there buried in sleep, then noiselessly moved in his bare feet toward the door, pistol in hand. Pressing against the wall where the door when open would entirely conceal his person until his murderous visitor had fairly entered the room, Easy Elbert, his face white and hard-set, but looking as cool and unmoved as though no danger impended, waited the return of the landlord.

This was not long delayed. Poor Quigley, between his fear of Easy Elbert and dread of the man who so sternly ordered him about, was in a very bad way, and his fingers trembled so that they could not insert the key.

"Give it to me—stand aside!" growled the stranger—for Easy Elbert in vain tried to remember the voice—and the next instant the bolt slipped silently back, the knob turned and the door was flung open, while a tall, active form leaped half-way across the room toward the bed.

"You are my prisoner, Elbert Gray—"

The noise made by the door in closing as Easy Elbert swung it to, cut the speech short, and the man turned his head with an angry frown, no doubt blaming the landlord—but instead, there stood Easy Elbert, half-dressed, his back against the door, his blue eyes gleaming over the leveled barrels of two full-cocked revolvers!

"Not a word, Sheriff Kollatz!" he said, his voice stern and menacing, though so low and carefully modulated. "Not a word until I have said my say—beware! I'll bore your brains with a brace of bullets if you dare offer to use a weapon! Be wise, man, and you may still come out on top of the heap. Play the fool, and you receive a fool's reward."

There were few braver men than Sheriff Jules Kollatz, and even now when he knew that he was helplessly in the power of one whom he believed was a murderous desperado, his bronzed cheek never paled, he betrayed not the slightest trace of fear. Still, he was no fool. He saw that this man meant every word he uttered—that he would shoot, and shoot to kill, too, at the least provocation.

He stood motionless, only his face turned toward the sport, but he spoke sharply:

"Don't shoot through the door, boys! He'll surrender—"

Easy Elbert broke into a low, mocking laugh, but his revolvers kept the sheriff covered, steady as fate.

"You can't play your old pard, Wild Bill, on me, Kollatz. It's you and me for this little game. I don't want to kill you—you're too good a man for that—and if you swear to hear me through to the end, it will be better for both of us."

"You know what I came here for, then?" demanded the sheriff.

"I can guess—but let that drop for a few moments. Pledge me your word as an honest man that you will not try to get the drop on me, before I have finished my explanation, and I'll put up these tools. I am sure we can come to an understanding, if you are half way agreeable."

"You won't try to give me the slip?"

"My dear fellow, are you in a suitable situation to impose conditions?" asked the dandy sport, with a laugh as soft and gentle as that of a woman. "But I'll not stand on my dignity, if you do so. Give me the pledge I ask—promise

to listen to what I have to say, without attempting to catch me off my guard, and on my part, I promise not to try to escape. If, when I have done, you still resolve to arrest me, say so plainly, and I will give you an even show to kill me or be killed. Is that plain enough?"

For one instant the sheriff hesitated, but he knew that Easy Elbert had him foul already—that if he so elected, he could kill him before he could strike a blow in return. He could not be more heavily handicapped by giving the pledge demanded.

"All right," he said, coldly, "I promise—I swear it, if you prefer—"

"No," and the dandy sport lowered his weapons and placed them upon the table. "Your word is enough for me. Your bitterest enemy could never accuse you of treachery."

A flush that was not one of displeasure passed over the bronzed face of the officer, and a kinder light came into his stern eyes, while his voice was softer than usual when he addressed the dandy sport.

"You know me, then? Yet I can't remember ever having met you before this occasion—and I seldom forget a face."

"I know you by report—but never mind that, now. There's no time to waste in bandying compliments. Please look at this note, while I dress," said Easy Elbert, pushing the bit of paper across the table.

"So! you had warning—when did you receive this note?"

"I found it lying on that table, when I came in this morning, at daybreak. How it came there, or who wrote it, I know no more than you do."

"Strange!" muttered the sheriff, knitting his brows. "At that hour there was no charge laid against you—indeed I only came in on the ten o'clock stage, and never knew my services were wanted until half an hour ago!"

"My dear sir," said the dandy sport, with a faint smile, "if you had experienced as many different surprises as I have during the last four-and-twenty hours, *nothing* could astonish you."

"At daydawn! You had ample warning for flight—"

"Quietly, sheriff—don't jump at conclusions, or you may get a tumble," a little sharply cried Easy Elbert, finishing his dressing and seating himself upon the edge of the bed. "Now listen to me. That note says I am in danger of being arrested for murder, and your presence here confirms it. I don't ask who laid the accusation. At the proper time I will be ready to meet him or them face to face, and prove my innocence, or suffer the penalty. But that time must await my convenience."

"You may, or may not, have heard that I had a little turn-up with some cowboys yesterday, and that I passed my word to meet them at three o'clock to-day, to give and take satisfaction. I mean to keep that appointment if I am alive when the hour comes. If you or any other man or men try to arrest me before that pledge is kept, you must kill me, or I will kill you. Is that plain enough?"

"You want liberty long enough to fight three duels—"

"Only one—I mean to take them at a single dose."

"Suppose you are killed?"

"Then you will be saved the trouble of making an arrest."

"You will be out in the open air, well armed, and maybe surrounded by friends, more than I can handle—"

"Even so, would your situation be any worse than when I had you covered, just now?" retorted Easy Elbert. "Come, sheriff. It is a simple question to decide. I swear to you, on my honor, that I don't know as I have a single friend in town who would raise a finger to save me from the gallows, even if they could do so without trouble or risk to themselves. I promise you that if I live through this meeting, I will immediately surrender to you without a single reservation. Refuse to accept my parole, and either you or I will never leave this room alive!"

"If you knew me, even by report alone, you should know that I can't be driven by threats—"

"Then I ask it as a personal favor," quickly cried Easy Elbert. "If arrested now, so near the hour set for my meeting with those ruffians, not only they, but everybody else would think I yielded gladly, to avoid the risk of a fight—and I'd prefer death to that sort of disgrace!"

"So would I!" said Kollatz, impulsively. "I can feel for you there, for I was once in much the same box, and I've never been the same man since. It is a bargain, then. You are free to go where you will, until after you have settled with those fellows. Then, if you are alive, you promise to surrender to me. Is that the arrangement?"

"Precisely. You have my pledge of honor—and no man can truthfully say that I ever broke that faith with either friend or enemy," earnestly uttered the dandy sport.

Silently the two men shook hands. Then, his customary airiness returning, the dandy sport said:

"You will join me at dinner? I have eaten nothing since supper, and have done work enough on that to kill a mule!"

Great was the honest landlord's amazement when he saw the two men come down the stairs arm in arm, and greater still when he saw them eating together—greatest of all when Easy Elbert ordered a couple of bottles of champagne and the men cordially drank each other's health.

It was nearly two o'clock when Easy Elbert and Kollatz left the hotel together, passing over to the livery stable where the dandy sport had put up the horse he rode into Purgatory the previous day.

Quickly as the affair had been arranged, a whisper had spread abroad that the dandy sport was under arrest, and that class which takes such exquisite delight in witnessing a "circus" where the admittance is as free as the interest is thrilling, were already bawling the rumor that bade fair to deprive them of the anticipated treat. Seeing the sheriff—well known to nearly every Purgatorian, if not to Easy Elbert—in company with the dandy sport, only served to confirm the ugly rumor, and a crowd quickly gathered around the stable.

One who had made himself most prominent among the rabble—a fat, greasy, red-faced fellow in dirty rags, his eyes draped in mourning, his nose and half of the face left bare by the bristling white beard covered with strips of dirty court-plaster—pressed close to Easy Elbert, on the side furthest from Sheriff Kollatz, and muttered hoarsely:

"Onder a'rest? Shell I lend the galoot one? Say the word, an' I'll down him so flat he'll never git up ag'in—"

"Get out, you rascal!" cried the dandy sport, giving the impudent fellow a thrust that sent him against the haunches of a spirited horse.

An angry plunge by the animal sent the bumper headlong across the stable, and scrambling to his feet, he fled from the barn. But the moment he was outside he cried:

"It's all true, gentlemen! The dirty cuss hes 'rested hisself 'cause he was afeard to face them ge-lorious bull-punchers—an' we don't git no circus a'ter all!"

A howl of indignation arose that caused the dandy sport's cheeks to flush and his blue eyes to glow vividly. He strode to the door, Kollatz keeping close to his side.

"That cowardly cur lies!" he cried, his voice ringing out clear and sharp as the note of a bugle. "Unless the cowboys back out, the meeting will take place precisely as agreed upon—"

"The cowboys don't take water so easily," called out Dick Knowdell, who had heard the rumor and at once set out to investigate its truth or falsity. "We're ready whenever you be, mister store-clothes!"

"And that is *now*," cried Easy Elbert. "Get your horses and weapons ready. I will be on the ground as soon as you are. I have only to saddle my horse."

A wild cheer greeted this sharp announcement, and only a hasty slinking away saved the ragged bumper from a rough handling. The large majority of the crowd at once set out for the ground indicated—a broad, almost bare and nearly level plain some little distance south of town—resolved not to miss the slightest item of the impending duel of one man against three.

Easy Elbert looked to the preparing of his horse in person, and when all was arranged to his satisfaction, he looked around for Kollatz, who was nowhere to be seen. Before the dandy sport had time to grow impatient, however, the sheriff made his appearance, an ugly light in his eyes.

Leaping upon the horse which had been prepared for him, he accompanied Easy Elbert out of the stable, not speaking until they were beyond danger of being overheard.

"I was called away—can you guess what for?" he abruptly asked, his voice still betraying angry annoyance.

"Something disagreeable, or your face speaks falsely," replied the dandy sport, with an easy laugh, bending over and affectionately patting the arched neck of his steed.

"The man who preferred the charge against you demanded that I arrest you *at once*!" growled the sheriff. "He said you would give me the slip—that you were only playing for a chance to run away—the dirty cur!"

"And of course you meekly submitted to his better judgment," lightly laughed the young man.

"He said that if I refused to do my duty, he and other lovers of justice would take the business into their own hands."

"That was crushing! And you?"

"My fingers simply played handkerchief to his nose—and I told him that at his first step of that sort, I would measure him for a wooden overcoat—the dirty, contemptible cur!"

Easy Elbert leaned back in his saddle and laughed long and loud. Despite his anger, Kollatz was forced to join in his mirth, and laughed until his brows cleared.

Easy Elbert asked no further questions, and to all seeming he had banished every thought concerning the black charge, thinking only of

the work immediately on hand. To all but himself this seemed serious enough, but he was smiling and composed, the picture of careless grace as the ground was reached, and he rode up to where the three cowboys sat on their horses, surrounded by an interested crowd.

Politely saluting them, Easy Elbert said:

"You are on the ground before me, gentlemen, but I am still nearly half an hour ahead of the time set."

"We ain't a-complainin', 'long's you've come here to fight," bluntly retorted Dick Knowdell.

"Rest assured, my dear sir, you shall have no grounds for complaint on that score," with a gentle smile that contrasted strongly with his words. "The understanding was, I believe, that I was to fight you all three at the same time. If I am mistaken, please correct me."

"That was it," growled Sandy McGill. "More fight—less talk."

"I came here to fight," Easy Elbert continued, still speaking to Knowdell; "and if you don't like the plan I propose, you are at liberty to select one man, I to take another, and they a third, we to fight by their decision. Are you agreed?"

CHAPTER XXIII. ONE AGAINST THREE.

"THAT was the 'greement," promptly responded Dick Knowdell. "But you won't find us hard to please. Only the shorter you speak, the quicker we kin 'tend your funeral—"

"Occupying the hearse—exactly," coolly interposed the dandy sport, a round of cheers greeting the speech, not so much for the retort itself as the admirable coolness of the speaker while on the eve of a battle to the death against long odds. "But this is not business. I will tell you my terms now, and when I say anything that you cannot agree to, interrupt me right there."

"We will fight on horseback—as riding is a prominent part of your profession, you cannot object to that. Sheriff Kollatz, here, I am sure will consent to give the word when we have taken our positions, and when that signal is given, all is fair. You fool me, if you can, for I mean to trick you, if possible—"

"An' the sort o' trick is mighty easy guessed at, too!" sneered Sandy McGill. "You've got the best critter, by long odds. You mean to run away—"

"Not until you are dead—be sure of that, you foul-mouthed cur!" cried Easy Elbert, his blue eyes aglow. "If you were not such a contemptible blot on humanity, one could almost feel sorry to see you signing your own death-warrant; but I will be doing mankind a service in rubbing you out of existence—"

"You ain't done it yit," growled the surly fellow, scowling.

"But I will," swiftly retorted the dandy sport, no longer the easy, almost languid speaking gentleman. "The first shot I fire will be for you, and it will sound your death-knell. I speak plainly, because I would not kill an egg-sucking cur without due warning. And now, in answer to your taunt, to satisfy your comrades and these gentlemen who have come here to enjoy the fun, I simply state that I have given my parole of honor to surrender myself to Sheriff Kollatz immediately this little affair is brought to a conclusion, to answer for a serious charge which some cowardly enemy has secretly brought against me. Of course you"—turning sharply upon Sandy McGill, "cannot comprehend the meaning of the word, but I will put you out of suspense in a very few minutes."

Sandy McGill was about to answer, when Dick Knowdell grasped his arm, sharply saying: "Hold your hush, boy. Ef you keep on talkin' we'll never git down to squar' business."

"There isn't much more to add," the dandy sport said, lightly. "The only additional condition is that when the word is given, you three men shall be together—not so widely scattered but that I can face you all at the same time. Of course you agree to this?"

"Fix the hull darned thing your own way," impatiently returned the cowboy. "We ain't axin' nothin' but a chance to sarve you as you sarved our mate, Jack Irish, an' the quicker all talkin' is over, the better we'll be satisfied."

Easy Elbert turned toward Sheriff Kollatz and politely asked him if he would take charge of the affair. The officer hesitated, but only for a moment.

"If I refuse, some one else will accept, so here goes, gentlemen," laughed the officer. "But to make sure there is no misunderstanding about the matter, let me tell you, gentlemen, that it is not the sheriff who is acting as referee now, but Jules Kollatz, the man, who means to see that both parties are given fair play, even if he has to burn powder himself!"

A ringing cheer from the crowd greeted this announcement, and it was plain that the popular sheriff had struck the right key-note.

"Mr. Kollatz, please toss up for these gentlemen to call heads or tails for first choice of positions," said the dandy sport when the cheer died away.

The sheriff complied, Knowdell calling out as the golden coin was spinning high above their

heads. He lost, but felt little concern thereat. On such ground as this there could be little advantage in first choice. So he thought, so all of the others thought, with one exception.

"Now, gentlemen, all!" cried Easy Elbert, his careless air vanishing like magic, leaving him the keen, ardent man of business. "The principal aim of mankind is to make money. Business before pleasure is a good maxim to follow, but when one can combine business and pleasure, so much the better. You have that chance offered you now. It may look like a one-sided snap, and I am half inclined to think that way myself. Still, though I tell you frankly that I will win if you bet, I won't blame you for backing your own opinions, even if they should run contrary to mine."

"Thought we came here on business—not to hear a durned fool shoot off his mouth at nothin'!" snarled Sandy McGill, waxing impatient at the delay.

"Somebody muzzle that cur before his foul breath poisons the atmosphere," quickly retorted Easy Elbert, drawing a large roll of bank-notes from his breast-pocket and causing their ends to flutter in the breeze.

"Gentlemen, I have a few government rags here. If I am sent over the range by these bull-punchers, it would hardly pay to take paper money with me, and for fear my legal heirs would get to quarreling over the division of the spoil, I'll divide it among you—provided you can win it."

"First—I will bet any gentleman that I kill yonder tow-headed gorilla at my first fire, and give you the odds of two to one on it."

"I've got fifty ag'inst a hundred that says you lie, clean from A to Ampersand!" cried Sandy McGill, lugging out a lean buckskin purse.

"I limited my offer to gentlemen—and even your mates dare not claim a place for you in that category," sharply retorted Easy Elbert.

"Knock the gentle off an' make it men, stranger," said Dick Knowdell, with a short laugh. "Do that, an' I'll take Sandy's bet off o' his hands."

"Sheriff, will you kindly consent to be stakeholder? Thanks—put up your money, my man," and the dandy sport placed a hundred-dollar bill in the hands of Kollatz. "A shrewd move on your part, bully Dick, since it insures you against being the target for my first shot, but it won't avail you much. I'm going to make a clean score this time. But to business. Any other gentleman care to invest on the same terms? Two to one that I turn Sandy McGill toes up with my first shot. If I miss him, or only wound, I lose my money. Two to one!"

"Yar's yer huckleberry, boss!" cried the red-faced bummer who had offered "to lay the sheriff out" at the livery stable. "A figger-one-with-three-long-geese-aigs-fer-a-tail that the red-eyed bull-puncher sends ye over the divide a-flukin'! Putt up yer money, an' I'll kiver it with my note—"

"Vanderbilt in disguise!" laughed Easy Elbert. "Somebody ask him to lend them a quarter—he wouldn't pan out more than that, unless sold for soap-grease."

"Come, gentlemen, this money is burning my fingers! If you don't like that bet, I'll give you your choice. Even money that I kill that gorilla, wing his two mates, and end the duel with the contents of one revolver. Or I will take the odds of two to one that I come 'out of the scramble without a scratch."

"I'll take both of those bets, for all the money you can put up!" cried a deep-toned voice, and Hugh Hardaway was seen pushing through the crowd.

"Ah!" exclaimed the dandy sport, his blue eyes glittering as he recognized the speculator. "You're the fellow I gave a ducking, yesterday, for insulting a lady! The word gentleman bars you out, even more surely than it does Sandy McGill, but I am tired of talking, and would as soon read you another lesson as not. Count his money, sheriff, and see that it is not counterfeit!"

Hard Hugh turned livid with rage, such utter scorn and contempt rung in the clear tones of the dandy sport.

"You shall answer for that, if you escape these men—"

"My answer will be given with a cowhide, then—with no more dignified weapon could a gentleman punish a cowardly woman-insulter," was the calm retort.

Not a little to the amazement of the Purgatorians who best knew Hard Hugh, the speculator made no reply, made no effort to draw a weapon, but thrust a roll of bills into the hands of the sheriff.

Kollatz counted these, and announced the sum, when Easy Elbert promptly covered the amount, handing Kollatz the remainder of his money, saying:

"You know my offers. Take all bets that are offered on those terms, please."

Riding clear of the crowd, the dandy sport dismounted from his horse and looked carefully to every strap and buckle, drawing the broad girth a little tighter.

Removing his outer garments until he was clad in close-fitting under-shirt, drawers and

socks alone, he tied a silk handkerchief tightly about his head, buckled spurs on his heels and took a single revolver in his hand.

Asking Quigley, the landlord of the Occidental, to take charge of his clothes, he vaulted into the saddle, and the noble black stallion, a thoroughbred, darted away over the sandy plain with the speed of a swallow on the wing.

A glorious sight—both horse and rider—and as he critically watched them, Dick Knowdell muttered:

"It's a pity to do it—but ef we don't kill him, he'll round us up, sure!"

"Talk won't pay fer whisky," grunted taciturn Dave Parmiter. "Better be warmin' up our critters."

There was sound sense in this advice, and his two partners realized the fact. They hastily removed all superfluous clothing, but retained their belts with knife and brace of revolvers each. Looking to the condition of saddles and bridles, they mounted and began warming their horses to the hot work which they knew was before them.

Good riders all three of them were, almost as a matter of course, considering their business in life, while their animals were also beyond the common run, but few eyes followed them in comparison to those interested in the actions of the dandy sport. And another such a daring, graceful exhibition of horsemanship not one of those present had ever witnessed. They saw, too, that horse and rider were in perfect accord with each other. The bridle-reins hung untouched. Not a word could they hear the bold rider speak, yet here and there the black stallion darted, whirling within his own length when at full speed, leaping from side to side, or stopping short—and through it all, that lithe, graceful form seemed part and parcel of the animal it bestrode.

Wheeling quickly, the black horse dashed low and level across in front of the crowd, from whom a sudden cry of wonder burst. Where was the rider? Not a trace of him was visible for a few seconds—then he was once more erect in the saddle!

"He means to come the Injun dodge onto us!" muttered Knowdell in warning. "When the word comes, ride straight for him an' shoot at his hoss! Ef the critter don't fall onto him, scatter an' keep pullin' trigger ontel he dies."

Swift as the flight of an arrow, Easy Elbert rode back and addressed the sheriff.

"I am ready, if the others are. I will ride out to the station I have selected, and when they have settled on their position, wave your hat. Then, as soon as they say ready, you may give the signal. That will be?"

"A single shot from a revolver. I will ride apart from the crowd, and hold the weapon above my head while I count twenty. That will be warning enough for all. If either of you fire a shot before I pull trigger, so help me God! I will kill you the very next instant!"

"Good enough!" answered Easy Elbert.

"We only ax a fa'r shake," added Dick Knowdell.

"Which you shall have as long as I can pull trigger," resolutely uttered the sheriff. "Now one word to you, gents," he added, turning toward the crowd. "After these gents take up their positions, not a word or cry from any of you. Bottle up your feelings until the fun is over. You might mean it well enough, and yet do incalculable injury by startling either a horse or a man. You understand that this is my final warning."

"Gentlemen, take your places!"

The black horse wheeled and carried its rider almost a quarter of a mile from the crowd, then wheeled and faced it.

Dick Knowdell eyed him keenly, then selected his stand about three hundred yards from where Easy Elbert stopped.

Sheriff Kollatz moved to one side, where both parties could see him distinctly, and raised his pistol, crying:

"Ready, gentlemen! I count twenty, then fire!"

Clear and distinct his voice rung out, and the last number was blended with the report of his revolver.

Instantly the three cowboys plied their spurs and dashed straight for the enemy, side by side, reins in their teeth and every hand holding a cocked revolver.

As swiftly the black stallion sprung into motion, but at a right oblique, instead of direct for the enemy. One instant the dandy sport was visible, sitting erect, revolver in his right hand, then he vanished from sight behind the body of his horse, executing the maneuver so skillfully that not even a hand or a heel was left in sight.

"Cut him off!" muttered Knowdell. "Don't shoot yet—make sure o' the hoss, an' when he falls, halt an' kiver behind your critters, on foot!"

Even as Knowdell spoke, the black horse plunged through a little clump of bushes, and a sharp cry came from the crowd. Kollatz wheeled with ready pistol, just in time to see the red-faced bummer knock Hard Hugh heels over head.

On dashed the black horse, running level and

true. On thundered the cowboys, riding slower, but still rapidly lessening the distance between them and the horse of the dandy sport, thanks to the sharp angle. And now they were nearly abreast the clump of bushes, and Knowdell cried hoarsely to his comrades:

"Pump in the lead! Kill the boss an' the man's ours!"

At the same instant the lithe form of Easy Elbert leaped up from the bushes, and a shrill whistle caused the black steed to wheel and race directly away from his pursuers.

They could see now that the stallion was riderless, but before they could think further, the dandy sport opened fire.

At the first shot Sandy McGill gave a convulsive leap in his saddle, his pistol exploding—but he was unconscious of that fact. Straight through his brain, from temple to temple, crashed the lead. The big cowboy reeled, then fell heavily from his saddle—dead ere his body touched the hot sand!

Swift as thought Easy Elbert darted to one side as the two cowboys fired—and still more swiftly came his reply, two shots in rapid succession. So rapid, that it seemed impossible for him to have taken sufficient aim to hit a target, especially when both were in swift motion. But with the reports, first Knowdell, then Parmiter, dropped their right arms, their weapons falling from their nerveless fingers!

"Halt! up with your left hands, or my next shots will bore your brains!" cried the dandy sport, sharply and menacingly.

Instantly he was obeyed. The cowboys had enough. They knew that Easy Elbert held them at his mercy, and leaning back, they stopped their horses, raising their unbroken arms.

"Good! I'd hate to kill two such honest fellows," cried the dandy sport, sounding a whistle that brought the black horse back to his side.

Leaping into the saddle, he rode up to the cowboys, saying:

"Have the doctor look to your hurts, and send him to me for pay. I hope to see you again, and to know you better, but just now I have another duty to perform. Sheriff Kollatz," he said, riding over to that worthy, "I surrender, according to my pledge. May I ask the nature of the charge against me?"

"Murder—you are charged with murdering a woman known as Wild Kate, last night!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CUNNING CONSPIRACY.

It will be remembered that, after his stinging repulse at the hands of Wild Kate, Hard Hugh immediately left the Big Bonanza gambling-rooms, but not before he had determined to be revenged upon both Wild Kate and Easy Elbert.

Almost the first man he met on stepping outside, was the terribly scarred desperado, Laughing Leo.

"You have warned the boys, as I bade you?" muttered the speculator, drawing the other aside in the deeper shadow.

"Mighty nigh all—more'n enough to do the business. The boss sent me to see you, last thing, so thar shouldn't be no mistake in kerryin' out orders. Both gals is to be tuck—"

"One of them—Wild Kate—is in the Bonanza now. Never mind her. Get hold of the other, and sink a lead mine in that long-legged overseer, Pettigrew. Did you tell Ben Davis and the others?"

"Sure. They're loafin' 'round your office, or was a bit ago when I went by thar."

"You still refuse? You won't undertake the job?"

"Cain't posserbly, boss. I'm p'izen tough, I know, but I ain't *that* bad," muttered Laughing Leo, in a husky voice.

"Bah! no preaching!" snarled the speculator, adding in a deeply significant tone: "Guard your tongue well, my gentle Christian, and bear in mind the penalty for betraying the secrets of one of the League."

"I don't keer a darn what *you* do, or anybody else, fer that matter—jist so I ain't in the dirty business. Needn't fear I'll squeal, either afore or after the work."

"See that you don't!" growled Hard Hugh, turning away, hastening to his office where he found Ben Davis and two others of a similar stripe awaiting his coming.

Ushering them into the building, Hugh Hardaway produced liquor, bidding them drink.

"Now to business, gentlemen," he said, eager to come to an understanding. "I want to hire you to-night, body and soul. Name your price—short and sweet!"

"A hundred apiece, ef we're goin' to resk our souls, too!" grinned Davis, refilling his glass and emptying it as quickly.

"You are to do what I say, and stop to ask no questions."

"You bet—even to rakin' the hull durned town, ef ye give the word. Ain't it, boys?" grinned the little fire-eater.

"You swear it by the oath of the League?"

The three men arose and clasped hands with

the speculator, one after the other, but there was no trace of mirth on their faces now. Such a prelude must mean dark and deadly work.

"Good! One more drink, then we must go. Our bird may give us the slip while we are talking."

Hardaway locked the office door behind them, and talked rapidly, in guarded tones, as they moved toward the Big Bonanza, where he meant to set one as a spy on Wild Kate, but while they were yet some distance away, his keen eyes caught sight of Wild Kate and Easy Elbert slowly moving up the street, busily talking.

In that moment Hugh Hardaway made an important change in the diabolical plans he had formed—a change which he hoped would result in killing two birds with one stone. A brief hesitation, then he spoke hurriedly to his men.

"Go and place yourselves in ambush along the road to the Silver Brick mine—just beyond the divide is a good place. If Wild Kate comes along before I join you, take her prisoner. Strike quick, or you may feel her claws. Lay by until you hear my signal. If that dandy sport is with her, either kill or capture him; I don't much care which."

The men, one by one, brushed past the young couple, and Hard Hugh, keeping in the densest shadow, watched them closely while he rapidly shaped the details of his truly diabolical plot.

It has already been said that his main object in life was to secure possession of the Silver Brick mine, and since fair means had failed, he was now to try foul. The black band, of which he was the real head, was to abduct Mabel Wilder, kill her father and sister—so the scheme was first laid out—and Hard Hugh was to force Mabel into wedding him, at his leisure.

The unexpected appearance of Wild Kate in Purgatory on this particular night, necessitated a change, which the speculator was quick to make.

"They left the Big Bonanza together," he muttered, hastily running over the salient points. "There will be plenty to swear to that. She leaves town for home, and never gets there. She is found dead—somebody appears to swear that they saw Easy Elbert murder her—lynch law—and two stumbling blocks out of my way!"

This, rudely blocked out, was his plan. It might be altered by circumstances, but the end should be the same.

Hard Hugh made no effort to eavesdrop the couple, knowing that to do so might be dangerous work, but he grinned like a veritable devil as he saw how passionate Wild Kate appeared—and he saw that other passers-by had noticed the fact, too. It would all come in good play when the tragedy burst upon the community.

He was satisfied, at length, when the young couple had fairly cleared the town, and regretting that he had not his men with him then, to fall upon his victims, he crept around and hastened on to the ambush.

Hard Hugh had scarcely reached this point, when the firing broke out at the Silver Brick mine, and he knew that Wild Kate would take the alarm at once.

"Quick—stretch the rope across the road—here in the shadow!" he exclaimed, and rapidly as the men obeyed, the act was accomplished not a moment too soon.

Wild Kate had parted from Easy Elbert only a few minutes after Hard Hugh stole around them, and was hastening home, half-crazed, when she heard the alarm. Instantly her own troubles were forgotten, and she ran along the road at full speed, stumbling over the tightly stretched rope and falling headlong with terrible force.

With a short, satanic laugh, Hard Hugh leaped out from cover and picked her up, bearing her back into the bushes, where his first move was to disarm her.

"Back to the road!" he snarled, as he saw Ben Davis and the other men had followed him. "That infernal dandy sport may follow. Stretch the rope and lay him out, if he *does* come!"

This was the danger which Easy Elbert would have run headlong into, only for that stumble and fall which left him unconscious for full a quarter of an hour. Just before the expiration of that time, the black band came riding along, and Hard Hugh intercepted the two members, Johnson and Williams, whom the black chief had directed to hasten to town and have their injuries attended to. The remainder of the band passed on, to be seen and followed by Easy Elbert under the mistaken idea that Old '49 was Wild Kate.

For a few minutes Hard Hugh could do nothing but curse and rave when his questions drew the whole story of the miserable failure from the wounded men. But then he gradually cooled down, and for fear the firing had alarmed the town, and a company set forth to investigate the matter, he drew his party to a safe distance from the road.

Already his quick wits saw a chance to partially retrieve the blunders made, and he spoke rapidly.

"Johnson and Williams, you will lend your horses to us. Go back to town, and wait in my stable until I come. Your wounds won't suffer much in the mean time, and I will make

amends for that with a golden salve. I will pay your doctor's bill, and insure you not only safety from even suspicion, but make you the heroes of the whole town!"

As a brother-member of the League, the men knew that they could trust him, and obeyed without demur or question, stealing away through the night.

Wild Kate, at this juncture, gave signs of returning consciousness, and Hard Hugh made haste to bind and gag her.

"Now, Davis, comes your turn," he resumed, when this job was accomplished to his satisfaction. "You and Kemper must dispose of this woman. Besides the wages I promised you, how much will you take to carry out such orders as I mean to give you, without question or scruple?"

"Kin you stan' a nother hundred apiece?"

"You shall have it," was the prompt reply. "I never haggle about terms with those who serve me faithfully. And you, Mason, don't be uneasy. The same amount awaits you, on the same conditions. Now listen, Davis."

"You and Kemper will mount these horses, and take Wild Kate with you, to Wolf Run. Leave her there—you understand?"

"You mean cut her throat?" asked Davis, coolly.

"Suit yourself as to the means, but see that she never leaves the gulch alive. The wolves will attend to the rest. Just so the bones and fragments enough of her buckskin suit are left to be recognized, that is all I care about. Mind, if she escapes, your lives, as well as mine, will be in danger."

"She won't never come back on her own legs—never you fret," replied the fire-eater, with diabolical coolness.

"You are as deeply interested as I am, so I know you will not be careless. Mount, now, and I'll hand the girl up."

Davis leaped into the saddle, and Hardaway balanced the bound and helpless form of Wild Kate across the little rascal's lap. Kemper also took the saddle, and the party separated.

With Mason at his heels, Hugh Hardaway hastened back to town, entering it by the most secluded ways, and finding the two wounded men in his stable, at the rear of his office.

They followed him into the office, when he struck a light.

"Make it as short as ye kin, boss," said Williams, gingerly nursing his shattered arm. "We done up our hurts after a fashion, but they're hollerin' mighty loud fer a doctor!"

"You can stand it a few minutes longer, when the reward is honor, praise and good gold, instead of the lynching noose," was the cool response. "But I'll put it as briefly as I can."

"You say that the man that fooled the band was the perfect image of 'Gene Fields'?"

"The very moral—even when we see 'em both face to face I couldn't 'a' sworn which was which."

"Good! it is the fellow who calls himself Old '49. Now I know just how to pull the wires."

"You two men were setting out after dark, on a prospecting trip. You had got wind of a rich streak, and chose to leave town by night, for fear of being followed and having your secret discovered. You heard a woman scream, and rushed to the rescue. It proved to be Wild Kate, as you recognized her before the two men assaulting her, shot you both down. You, Johnson, was stunned by that shot which shattered your jaw, while Williams stumbled and struck his head on a stone, knocking him senseless. But you both recognized the rascals—Old '49 was one, the dandy sport who calls himself Easy Elbert was the other. You are confident of that, for you saw them both in town, when they had that turn-up with the Jack Irish gang. You *did*, I believe?" he added, inquiringly.

"Sure!" was the prompt reply. "We hated awfully to leave town afore the rest o' the circus came off, but we was playin' fer a big strike, an' knowed they wouldn't nobody think o' watchin' or follerin' us, long as thar was a chance fer them critters to lock horns ag'in."

"Precisely!" and the speculator nodded approvingly. "Stick to that line, to-morrow, and you're all right. Those wounds, with the account you can give of them, will keep you in whisky for a month, outside of what I pay you."

"And my share will be to smell of their breath after they drink, won't it?" put in Mason, a tall, slender good-looking fellow, but bearing unmistakable traces of heavy drinking.

"I am coming to you, now. Outside of the gang, who has seen or spoken to you since you came into town?"

"Not a soul has spoken to, or even set eyes on me, so far as I know," was the prompt reply. "Davis tackled me just at the edge of town, and said there was work ahead, with big pay. We lay shady until you came back."

"So I understood, and for that reason I kept you here instead of sending you with Davis. Not that I trust Kemper more than you, when you fight shy of whisky, but get you outside of a few drinks, and your tongue runs away with your wits. Nothing of that sort will answer now. You can keep an oath, I know. Swear that you will not drink another drop of liquor until

after this business is wound up. I will pay you well enough to make it an object."

"I have already taken the oath to obey you—repeat it, and I'll take it again," was the prompt response.

"I will trust you. Play your part well, and you will never regret it. Now listen closely.

"You will leave town secretly, and only return to it to-morrow, an hour or two before noon. You will at once declare that while taking the short cut past Wolf Run, you saw two men shoot and kill a third, tossing the body down into the gulch. You were a good ways off, and only noticed them a few moments before the bloody deed. It was over before you could shout a warning, and in hopes of bringing the rascals to justice, you lay low until they disappeared. Then you hastened at once to town, to lay information of the dastardly deed before those who would investigate it."

"It's a straight story, easy to repeat, but suppose Davis makes a blunder—suppose the prisoner gets away from him, or some accident happens—what will be the consequence to me, when I have guided the crowd there?"

"Is Davis a man likely to botch a little job like this?" impatiently demanded Hard Hugh. "You know him as well as I do. You heard the instructions I gave him, and the reply he made. Be sure the evidence will be there, to corroborate your story. As for the risk, you are paid for it. Such wages are not earned by risking nothing."

"And I get the same amount you promised Davis?"

"Yes—but see that you earn it well. Now slip out the back way, and see that nobody recognizes you while leaving town," added Hardaway, rising and opening the door, through which Mason slipped and rapidly glided away through the night.

CHAPTER XXV. A SERIES OF SURPRISES.

THIS was the charge brought against Easy Elbert—for at him alone the blow was aimed at first, since Hugh Hardaway remained in ignorance of the fact of Old '49's escape from the vengeance of the black band, until after his infernally ingenious machinery was put in motion.

The speculator played his cards admirably. He contrived to have several of the most reputable business men in town with him when the charges were made, and had very little to say himself. In thus acting, he showed his good judgment. If he should force the lead, there were those who would attribute his actions to a desire for revenge against one whom he dared not assail after a more manly fashion.

The three pretended witnesses told their stories, exactly as they had been drilled by Hugh Hardaway, and everything went as he had calculated, until the stage came in, and one of the party recognized Sheriff Jules Kollatz as a passenger. That was the first adverse blow.

Purgatory had no law officers at that time, and as the men whom Hard Hugh so carefully selected to hear the charges, were really gentlemen, they gladly jumped at the chance of shifting the great responsibility upon one who had the proper authority for acting, as well as the courage and skill.

Hard Hugh could only yield to them, while inwardly cursing them and the sheriff. It was lynch-law he had calculated upon, not a legal arrest and trial. His enemy should be hung by the mob while the first outburst of fury lasted.

Until the appearance of Sheriff Kollatz, fortune seemed to favor the scheming speculator at every turn. After that, he received blow upon blow. He it was whose nose Kollatz pulled for insisting on his arresting Easy Elbert at once, and it was he whom the red-faced bummer knocked end over end for shouting out that warning to the cowboys, when he saw the dandy sport drop from his horse into the clump of bushes.

Until Sheriff Kollatz publicly announced the charge on which Easy Elbert was arrested, not more than a dozen persons in the crowd suspected what was in the wind. But then a wild scene arose. Some of those instigated by Hard Hugh, raised the terrible cry of blood, and only for the prompt action of the sheriff and a few friends whom he had cautioned to be on the alert, beyond a doubt the dandy sport would never have left that spot alive. Their prompt and concerted action confused the rioters, and before the mob could be organized, Kollatz had his prisoner safe back in town, locked up with a trusty guard in his chamber at the Occidental.

The sheriff's next move was to place the two wounded witnesses, Johnson and Williams, under guard. Then he addressed the excited mob—rendered doubly so by the startling news which had come in from the Silver Brick mine—asking them as honest men, to help him in getting to the bottom of the bloody affair.

"Assuming that every word of the stories told by those three men is true—which we have no right to do until we have exhausted every means of investigation, for the law says we must consider every man innocent until he is

proved guilty—we owe it to ourselves as honest men, to see that the criminal receives his just reward—"

"That's a rope an' a sign-post all ready—"

"Muzzle that dog, somebody!" cried the sheriff, sharply. "No, gentlemen. I have never yet lost a prisoner through lynch-law, and I never will while I have strength enough left in me to pull trigger. I mean to take the prisoner to where he will receive a just and impartial trial, but at the same time, it is my duty to collect all possible proof, either for or against him, and I ask you to aid me as far as you can.

"The description given by this man, Mason, closely corresponds with the personal appearance of the accused, but it may also apply to others. Still, if we find that the person whom he swears he saw murdered and afterward tossed into the gulch, proves to be the same whom the other witnesses tried to rescue, the chain of evidence will be tolerably complete. So I ask you all to bear me company to Wolf Run."

The sheriff, Doctor Paxton and others before whom the evidence was first laid, Mason and a few others, were furnished horses for the journey to Wolf Run, while nearly the entire population of Purgatory followed them, on foot or riding, eager to learn all that was to be found out, at the earliest possible moment.

Mason proved himself an admirable actor, and he had no fear that his foul lie would be discovered, for Ben Davis and his mate had returned to town, assuring his confederates that he had faithfully performed his share of the work.

Hugh Hardaway, by this time tolerably well reconciled to the aspect affairs had assumed, formed one of the party of horsemen, though keeping his tongue well under control.

A brisk ride of an hour carried the party to the mouth of the deep, lonely gulch known as Wolf Run. A small stream flowed through its winding length, and this, together with the great number of wolves which had their dens in the thousands of holes and crevices, gave the gulch its ominous title.

Before the party had passed up the gulch one mile, they could hear the wild snarling and howling of fighting wolves. More than one pulse quickened and bronzed face turned pale as they pressed on, and then abruptly halted—almost recoiled—with cries of horror, as a terrible sight broke upon them.

A score of wolves were fighting over some bones and fragments of blood-stained clothing, dragging them here and there, growling and snarling, snapping at each other like mad—only to turn and flee with lugubrious howls as the horsemen rounded the bend and came in sight.

Sheriff Kollatz was the first to recover his nerves.

"Keep back, gentlemen!" he cried, dismounting and drawing a revolver. "Doctor Paxton, you and a couple of men who were well acquainted with the garb worn by the woman, Wild Kate, come with me. The rest of you stand back for the present."

The four men went forward and began carefully examining the ghastly remains. And with each passing moment the crowd in the gulch grew denser, until those in front were completely hemmed in and gradually forced ahead, despite their efforts to maintain their places.

Silently the two men who had volunteered to identify the fragments of clothing, arose, but Doctor Paxton still busied himself with collecting the bones, the coolest one among the entire party—possibly the only man of them all who had all his wits about him.

"Well?" asked the sheriff, facing the two men.

"There can be no doubt," was the slow response. "Every citizen of Purgatory could swear to those fragments. They are part of the buckskin suit which Miss Kate Wilder wore no later than last night."

For one breathless moment there was complete silence. Then it seemed as if all pandemonium had been turned loose in Wolf Run gulch. A single voice started it—whose, no one asked or seemed to care. A voice that called for the lynching of the foul assassin—the murderer of a woman!

Howls and yells—groans and curses—threats of fire and torture—all broke out in a terrible chorus. The crowd was instantly changed into a bloodthirsty, unreasoning mob. It swayed to and fro, for the moment penned in between the rocky walls.

Kollatz, knowing that the life of his prisoner was in deadly peril, rushed to his horse and leaped upon its back, trying to pass through the densely-packed mob, his deep voice ringing out above the confusion, when Doctor Paxton leaped to his feet with a shrill scream that instantly commanded the attention he calculated upon.

"Gentlemen," he cried, raising his hand as if to command silence while he spoke, "the majority know me as a man of my word. Now, on my professional honor, I assure you that these bones are those of a man, not of Miss Wilder, or any other woman!"

The crowd was rendered absolutely dumb by this extraordinary announcement. The speaker was well known as a truthful man, and a rare-

ly skilled surgeon, when not under the influence of liquor, and he was undeniably sober now.

For an instant Hugh Hardaway was as greatly amazed and dumfounded as any of the rest, but then he believed that the surgeon was lying, in hopes of appeasing the mob until Kollatz could get his prisoner out of their reach. Forgetting the part he had set for himself to play, he screamed:

"He lies—he and Kollatz are acting in collusion—"

So far he spoke, but no further. Sheriff Kollatz, unable to ride within arm's length, leaped upon his saddle and sprung over the heads of the crowd, grasping the speculator by the throat with one hand, while the other brought the butt of a clubbed revolver with stunning force down upon his head!

Like a dead man Hard Hugh fell to the ground, while his assailant settled down in the saddle the stricken man had just vacated. Astounded and bewildered, the crowd stood gaping—but as soon as they could recover from the successive shocks, Kollatz knew that there would be hot work.

Fortunately for him, perhaps, the chain of surprises had not yet reached its end.

A gasping cry floated down from above—not from the clouds, as it first appeared, but from the right summit of the canyon wall. And there came the words:

"Help! for the love of Heaven—help—!"

A woman stood tottering there, her arms outstretched toward the sea of upturned faces. Then she reeled and fell, her head hanging over the escarpment. And in that white, ghastly face, streaked with blood, nearly every man present recognized the woman on whose bloody remains they had thought they were gazing—the face of Wild Kate!

Although he had never before set eyes upon her, Sheriff Kollatz knew who it was from the gasping murmur that ran through the crowd, and he instantly cried out:

"Up and save her, you who know the ground! If she makes the slightest move, she must be hurled down here to death!"

"Don't let them git away that hatched the lie about Easy Elbert!" cried the fat, red-faced bummer, setting the example by knocking down Mason who, white as a sheet, was trying to steal away. "The gal ain't dead, an' somebody lied!"

Recalled to a sense of his duty, Kollatz saw that both Mason and Hugh Hardaway were bound hand and foot, and placed in charge of men whom he could thoroughly trust.

A few minutes later, a loud shout from above gave assurance that Wild Kate was rescued from her perilous situation, and only pausing to direct the men in charge of the prisoners to mount them on horseback and hasten back to town at full speed, placing them under guard with the two wounded witnesses, Kollatz followed the crowd out of the gulch to the spot where Wild Kate reclined, now restored to consciousness.

She was bleeding freely from a stab in her bosom, and Doctor Paxton bade all retire until he could attend to the wound. This was quickly attended to, as far as possible with his limited stock of appliances, and then he said that Kate might briefly answer the necessary questions.

She was too weak from loss of blood to say much, but managed to reveal the whole fiendish plot.

She detailed her capture, and told who the villains were.

Search was at once made for Ben Davis and Kemper, but they had fled during the confusion, no one knew whither.

There were a few points on which she was ignorant, but which came to light afterward, and to make all clear, they are inserted in their proper place.

Hard Hugh proposed to Laughing Leo to kill Wild Kate, but he refused. However, he said that he had spoken to the black chief about it, and that person agreed to do the deed. As the reader knows, Hardaway was forced to alter his plans, and for that reason hired Ben Davis and Kemper to do the murder. Davis promised, but he had a secret understanding with the chief of the black riders, and instead of killing Kate, took her to the retreat and sold her to the outlaw, who bade a woman who lived in the den to strip the girl and give her other clothes. This was done. The peculiar buckskin suit was placed on the corpse of one of the men killed that night, and flung into Wolf Run, no one dreaming that the deception would be discovered. Then Davis and Kemper hastened back to town, just in time to witness the duel and arrest.

Soon after they left with the corpse Wild Kate was visited by the chief of the black riders, still in his disguise. She recognized him as Ethelbert Graindorge, and accused him as such. He laughed at her—swore that she should never leave that gloomy den but as his wife—and then clasped her in his arms, kissing her repeatedly.

There was a wild scream, and he released her just as she snatched a revolver from his belt and shot him twice.

As she did this the Mexican woman leaped upon her and stabbed her in the bosom. Believing it was her death-wound, and seeing the woman preparing to strike again, Kate leaped back and shot her dead, then fainted.

How long she lay senseless she had no means of knowing, but she finally recovered sufficiently to crawl out of the den. The fresh air revived her in a measure, and she started for the town, and managed to reach Wolf Run, where she again fainted. The sound of voices aroused her, and she dragged herself forward until she could make herself seen.

Of all who listened to her thrilling recital, broken by gasps and pauses of acute pain, no one seemed more deeply interested than the red-faced bummer so frequently alluded to. Now, when she paused again, he could no longer contain himself, and eagerly demanded:

"What is this place? Say just one more word, to set us on the right track—"

"Back!" sternly cried Kollatz. "Give the lady air and rest. What does it concern you, any way?"

A hard, grim laugh broke from the man as he tore off his false beard and showed the padding which made his form so rotund, then said:

"I'm one o' the men you was huntin' fer—Old '49! Is it so p'izen queer I should want to see the bottom facts?"

Wild Kate managed to utter a few words in description of the den, when she was saved further trouble by a man—one of the black band, who hoped thus to prevent suspicion falling on him—who declared that he recognized the place and could guide a party directly to it.

His offer was accepted, and leaving the doctor with Wild Kate, the rest of the people followed his lead.

A few minutes sufficed to carry them to the lonely cave, and Old '49 was the first one who entered. A pistol-shot greeted him, but he leaped forward and snatched away the weapon which the black chief was pointing to his own head.

A second swift clutch tore away the black cowl, and Old '49 staggered back with a cry of amazement—a cry which was echoed back by the no less astounded spectators.

The mysterious black chief was Laughing Leo!

CHAPTER XXVI.

ETHELBERT GRAINDORGE AT LAST.

LAUGHING LEO, yes; but not as the wondering Purgatorians had known him until now. The horribly scarred face was there, but where had been an empty socket was now a glittering blue eye!

A low, gurgling laugh broke from his lips—the lips of a dying man, as all could see. It was more triumphant than bitter, and he addressed Old '49:

"You thought to uncover the face of Easy Elbert? Bah! what do you detectives amount to, anyway? Nothing! For years I have laughed at and played with you—to die at last by the hand of a woman, whose instinct told her what your boasted acumen failed to fathom—that I was Ethelbert Graindorge!"

"I never bragged—I ain't no detective," muttered the old man, still dazed and bewildered. "I hunted you 'cause you murdered David Arbuckle—my son."

It was Laughing Leo's turn to be surprised, but he quickly regained his self-control, and beckoned to the sheriff, whom he had recognized.

"I've got my death, or perhaps I wouldn't be so willing to speak. Write down what I have to say, and I will sign it as my death-bed confession."

"Fetch the doctor, somebody," faintly gasped Old '49, on whose limbs a paralytic touch seemed to have fallen. "He mustn't die—he's got to hang—I swore it—"

A low, mocking laugh from the dying man. Sheriff Kollatz threatened Old '49 with arrest if he interfered.

And then, bit by bit, Laughing Leo made his confession, while Sheriff Kollatz wrote down each word as they fell from his lips. No need to repeat the black, tragic tale here, since nearly every essential point has already been placed before the reader. A brief synopsis will do.

He, now known as Laughing Leo, was Ethelbert Graindorge. When his audacious fraud was discovered, he fled to the mines, and led a dog's life for more than a year, seeing a detective searching for him in every stranger, but then he was furnished an impenetrable disguise by an accident. A blast prematurely exploded, blowing him up, and leaving him the horribly disfigured, distorted and ungainly being he now was. Still, it had its consolation. No one could possibly recognize him as the elegant, handsome Ethelbert Graindorge on whose head rested such heavy premiums.

He drifted to Purgatory, and fell in with Hugh Hardaway, who suggested the idea of a road-agent band. Laughing Leo inserted an improvement of his own. He procured a glass eye, and had made for him a suit which, by pads and braces, together with practice, enabled him to assume an almost straight attitude, the nature of the black disguise concealing all else

that might otherwise have betrayed him. Not a living soul, save the Mexican woman who now lay dead beside him, even suspected that Laughing Leo and the chief of the black riders were one and the same person. One less horribly disfigured might have found it difficult to play the dual role so successfully.

He waylaid Old '49 and buried him alive, because he believed the detective, as he thought him, had found a clue to his identity. He it was who led the assault on the Silver Brick mine.

He first met Easy Elbert face to face, when the latter freed Old '49 from the death-stake, and recognizing him from his extraordinary likeness to his former self, was glad to let them both go free. Only through fear of arousing the suspicions of his men, did he consent to ambush the couple on their way to town. Afraid lest Easy Elbert be slain, he, while lying in wait, fastened a revolver between two rocks, cocked it, fastened a string to the trigger, and by these means fired the shot that alarmed Easy Elbert and Old '49. And he it was who altered the rope by which Easy Elbert was hung.

Why go to so much trouble? Because he and Easy Elbert were twin brothers!

That night Purgatory seemed fully deserving its name.

The true story had spread like wild-fire, and the mob rose in deadly earnest. Sheriff Kollatz, Easy Elbert and a few others strove to turn the tide, but almost ere they realized the fact, they were seized and bound, hand and foot. Then the terrible law of the border was exercised to the very limit.

Hugh Hardaway, a perfect craven now, crying and begging piteously for his life, was hung first. Then the three lying witnesses followed him to eternity by the same elevated route.

Every man on whom the faintest suspicion could rest was flogged and tortured to force a confession that they belonged to the black riders. Fields, Davis, Kemper and others who were implicated, were sought for, but they had fled. Some were found, many days later, but not then.

Ethelbert Graindorge lived to sign his confession, then died, and was buried in the same grave with the Mexican woman whose mad jealousy had indirectly led to his and her death.

Old '49 witnessed the burial, then disappeared, no one could say whither. And, though Easy Elbert caused close and extended search to be made for him, he was never heard of more.

Wild Kate, though suffering long and severely from her wound, eventually recovered both her health and her former spirits. Much of the credit for both cures must be attributed to Easy Elbert, the dandy sport.

As soon as Kate was able to receive visitors, he called, and placed the record of his past life fairly before her, producing ample proof of his truth.

Ethelbert Graindorge and Elbert Graindorge were twins, marvelously alike in form, face and voice; but there the resemblance ceased. Ethelbert was all that was evil and cruel, while his twin was his opposite in nearly every respect. Their parents died when the lads were young, and they were taken in charge by their uncle, David Demond, a queer, half-crazy bachelor, whose peculiar training did Ethelbert more harm than good. He was the favorite, and finally, after being severely punished for a trick really played by his petted brother, Elbert ran away from home.

For many years he was absent, and when he once more reached America, it was only to hear the story of his twin-brother's terrible crime—to see his portrait in all the papers, and to realize that his own life was in danger from the marvelous resemblance which existed between them.

What else he said need not be repeated here. Sufficient to add that in less than a year Wild Kate yielded to his peculiar wooing, and became Mrs. Elbert Graindorge.

At the same time Mabel Wilder made Perianter Pettigrew happy, having first nursed him for months, until the terrible wound he received in the night attack on the Silver Brick mine, was healed.

Need we add anything more?

THE END.

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